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WEAR-DOWN HOLDS

1. Airplane spin
2. Arm drag
3. Arm lock
4. Asian spike
5. Atomic drop
6. Bear hug
7. Bite
8. Body slam
9. Body tackle
10. Bulldog
11. Chicken wing
12. Choke slam
13. Claw
14. Clothesline
15. Cross body block
16. Double axehandle
17. Drop kick
18. Eagle split
19. Elbow smash
20. Eye gouge
21. Face rake
22. Fireman's carry ram
23. Flying body press
24. Flying clothesline
25. Flying drop kick
26. Flying elbow drop
27. Flying head butt
28. Flying mare
29. Forearm smash
30. Foreign object
31. Full nelson
32. Giant swing
33. Grapevine
34. Hair pull
35. Hammer lock
36. Head lock
37. Head stomp
38. Hip roll
39. Irish whip
40. Knee drop
41. Leg lock
42. Leg sweep
43. Manager interference
44. Monkey flip
45. Overhead toss
46. Pole ram
47. Reverse chin lock
48. Rolling scissors
49. Rope burn
50. Russian sickle
51. Savate kick
52. Scissors grip
53. Shoulder breaker
54. Slingshot
55. Snap mare
56. Step-over toe hold
57. Suplex
58. Surfboard
59. Turnbuckle smash
60. Wrist lock

SET-UP HOLDS

61. Abdominal stretch
62. Avalanche
63. Backbreaker
64. Backroll press
65. Belly to belly
66. Big splash
67. Boston crab
68. Brain buster
69. Camel clutch
70. Cobra clutch
71. Cradle
72. Crucifix
73. DDT
74. Figure four
75. Flying leg drop
76. Gourd buster
77. Hurricanrana
78. Moonsault
79. Neckbreaker
80. Piledriver
81. Power bomb
82. Power slam
83. Scorpion deathlock
84. Sleeper
85. Slingshot suplex
86. Spine buster
87. Stunner
88. Sunset flip
89. Superplex
90. Texas cloverleaf

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WRESTLER'S NAME (DO NOT USE ANY REAL PRO WRESTLER NAMES) _____

WEAR-DOWN HOLDS: *Choose 10 of the holds at the left numbered 1-60. Only use a hold once.*

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

6 _____ 7 _____ 8 _____ 9 _____ 10 _____

SET-UP HOLDS: *Choose 5 of the holds at the left numbered 61-90. Only use a hold once.*

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____

FINISHING HOLD: *Create your own custom final maneuver or choose a hold from our list.* _____

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

JOHN CENA GOT an A in this issue of "Reports Cards Of The Stars," but as the principal of the *PWI* School (where we hand out report cards but teach nothing), I reserve the right to hand out extra credit. Cena gets that extra credit for his public stance against the use of performance-enhancing drugs.

On the way to work, I usually listen to WFAN, the sports-talk radio show from New York. Not long ago, I was pleasantly surprised when hosts Boomer Esiason and Craig Carton did a phone interview with Cena. The WWE superstar was doing the media rounds to promote his movie, *12 Rounds*, but the topic that dominated the conversation that morning was steroids.

It is Cena's belief that the penalties for using steroids are not strong enough. "If you give the athlete the penalty of going to jail, losing major sponsorship dollars, losing major contract dollars, then athletes would think twice about using performance-enhancing drugs," Cena said.

Without saying it in a direct quotation, Cena was saying that the penalties for violating the WWE Wellness Policy do not go far enough. Giving a wrestler two opportunities to fail before facing termination is not the most effective way to deal with the situation. Start throwing offenders in jail and the problem will take care of itself.

Cena claims that he is "genetically gifted" and not only has he never used steroids, he has never been tempted to use them. I believe him. Questioned by former NFL quarterback Esiason whether he has gotten push-back from other WWE wrestlers, Cena went a step further and said that his message is not being well received by wrestlers nor management. If he's getting flak now, imagine how bad it would be if he were a user. Someone would have outed the hypocrite by now.

No, Cena's power is natural. And he uses it not just to lift weights and throw opponents around the ring, he uses it to speak out like no other wrestler in the world could. The most anybody in authority can do is frown upon him; they certainly aren't going to fire him.

Cena is particularly upset over the public's mindset that any athletic achievement is drug enhanced. A 500-foot home run is not viewed the same if it comes off the bat of a player in 2009 as it did when Mickey Mantle hit them in the '50s, and '60s. Closer to home, the conventional belief is that no one can have the physique of a John Cena without a little illegal help.

"It can be done without drugs and it is being done without drugs," he told WFAN listeners.

Whether or not these listeners choose to hear is beyond anyone's control, particularly a pro wrestler, whose line of work alone would make the general public skeptical. Still, I give the man a lot of credit (indeed, extra credit) for getting up on a soap box from which many of his peers would like to see him slip. He could have used some very valuable TV time to promote himself and his movie. He chose to talk about the steroid problem. And while I am not sure I agree with his solution, I am quite sure that if there were more people in powerful positions who were willing to take a hard stand, we wouldn't be in the situation we are now.

Stu Saks

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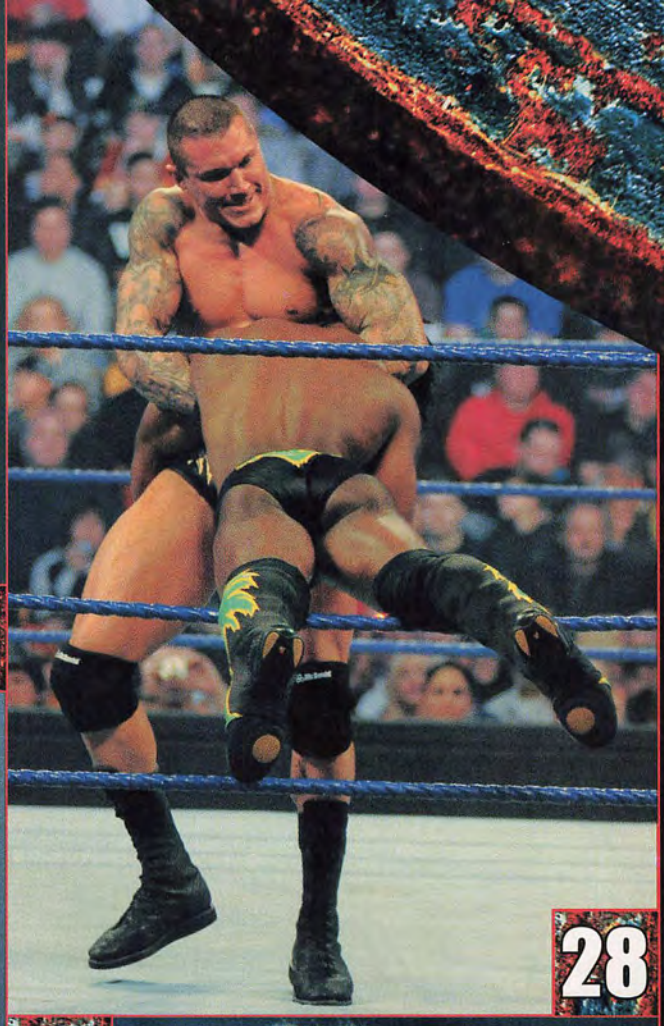

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LOOK FOR THE AUGUST 2009 EDITION OF PRO WRESTLING ILLUSTRATED, ON SALE JUNE 16

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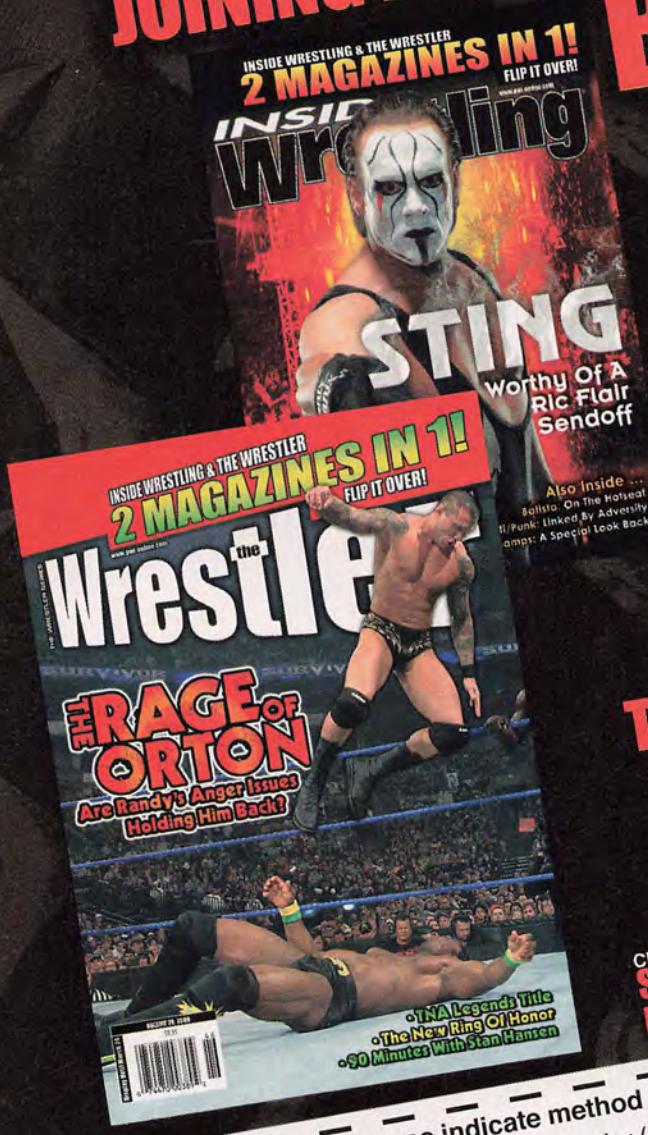
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REPORT CARDS OF THE STARS

EACH SPRING, THE editors and staff of *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* identify 50 of the top wrestlers and tag teams and evaluate their performance in five key categories. Our annual "Report Cards Of The Stars" issue is always one of our most controversial magazines of the year, and one that frequently gets plenty of feedback—both from fans and from the wrestlers who get graded.

Let's face it, everyone gets anxious about report cards. No one particularly enjoys being evaluated by a group of people and being graded according to their perception of your performance in a group of standard categories. But we believe that the *PWI* Report Cards are an accurate and objective measure of a competitor's achievement, abilities, potential, and shortcomings over the course of the past year.

Each of the 50 competitors profiled in this issue have been graded in five key areas: Goal Achievement, Marketability, Repertoire, Career Growth, and Overall Value. Each wrestler has a somewhat unique set of goals, and they are graded by how they fared in relation to those goals. For example, Jack Swagger's goals a year ago probably involved breaking out of the WWE developmental system and making an impact on a WWE brand. He has achieved those goals. Samoa Joe, on the other hand, was looking to continue to dominate TNA and extend his reign as TNA World champion. Joe came up short with that goal, so he receives a lower grade. Joe headlined more pay-per-views and is a bigger star than Swagger, but Swagger did a better job of achieving his goals, so he gets the higher grade.

Marketability refers to a wrestler's star power and his connection to the audience. Does the wrestler sell merchandise and tickets, or does the arena go silent when he makes his way to the ring? Whether it's fair or not, marketability is essential to a wrestler's long-term success.

In evaluating Repertoire, we look at the strength of each wrestler's fundamentals: the effectiveness of their move set and style, their ring generalship or ability to know the right time to execute the right move. Having an extensive move set is important, but being efficient and effective without taking unnecessary risks is just as important.

Career Growth is closely tied to Goal Achievement. Has this wrestler advanced his career significantly over the course of the past year, or has he slipped? We also consider where that wrestler is currently positioned and how he or she is performing against their potential.

Finally, we grade each competitor on Overall Value to his respective promotion or brand. A wrestler can be valuable in a variety of ways—by consistently wrestling great matches, by selling tons of merchandise, by being a mentor to other wrestlers. By the same token, a wrestler can simply be taking up roster space.

One thing that slightly skews our results is that we have selected 50 of the sport's top competitors. We are grading top performers, so failing marks are few and far between. We try to adjust our grading curve accordingly, and we believe our grades give an excellent indication of the strengths, weaknesses, and performance of our subjects.

The grades are in; we have our honor roll and we have our candidates for summer school. Enjoy. We await your feedback.

○ ○ ○

(Special thanks to Dan Murphy, Al Alven, Bill Meltzer, Frank Krewda, and Dave Lenker, who wrote the analyses on the pages that follow. We would also like to thank Harry Burkett for compiling the Sting section.)

KURT ANGLE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The past year has been extremely unproductive for Kurt Angle. Since dropping the TNA World title at Lockdown 2008, Angle has slipped from World title contention, lost matches to A.J. Styles, Jeff Jarrett, and Sting, and shown signs of being on the verge of a mental breakdown. He has, however, orchestrated the creation of the Main Event Mafia, a stable that took over TNA and has run roughshod over the company for the past six months. He wields considerable power, but his power is slipping. **GRADE: B-**

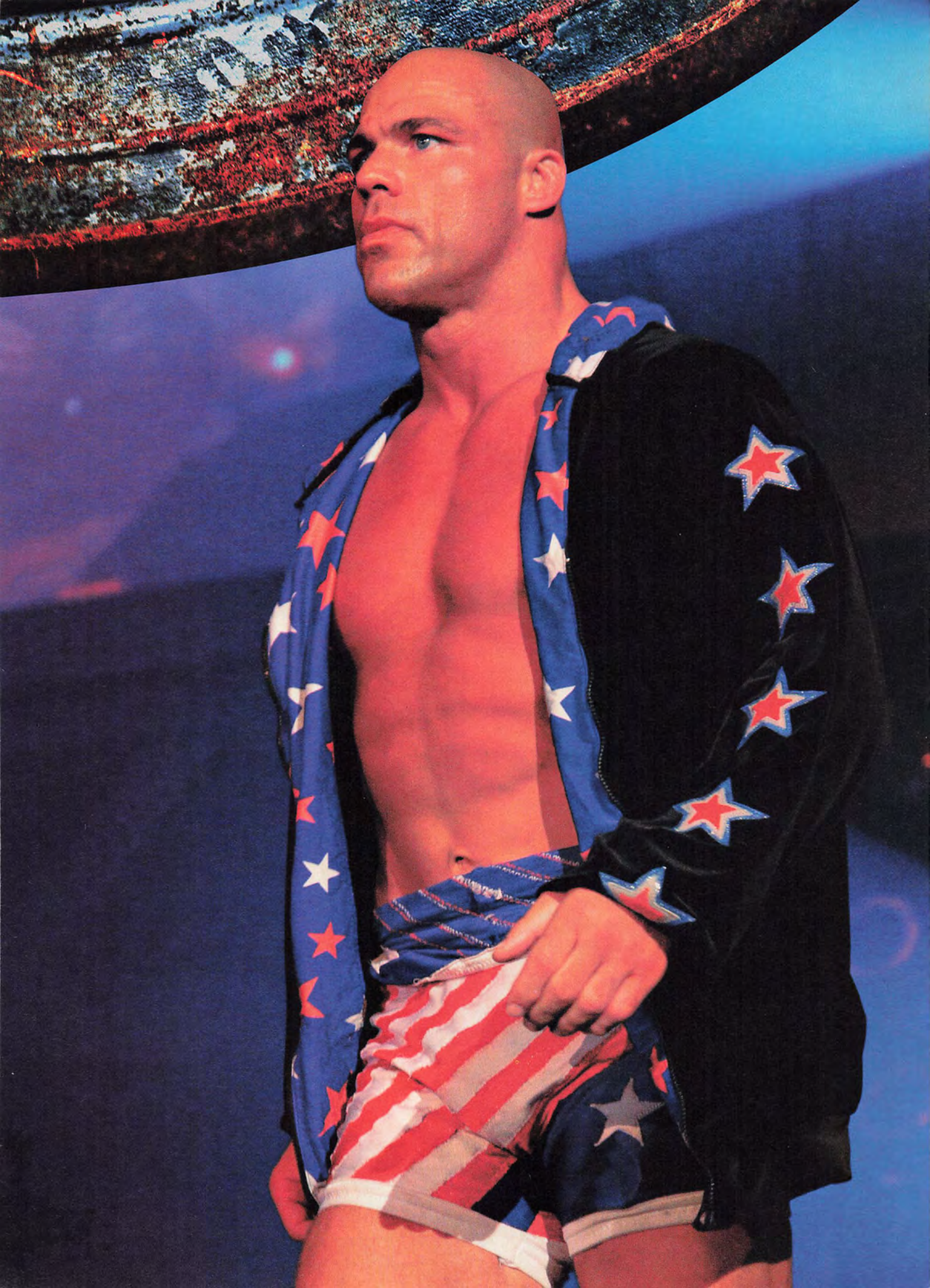
MARKETABILITY: As an Olympic gold medalist and an eight-time world champion, Angle is one of the biggest stars in the game. As a wrestler, he is virtually unparalleled. He is widely considered to be the most technically sound pure wrestler of the past decade. But his bizarre behavior often eclipses those sterling qualities. His public verbal attacks on Vince McMahon and Jeff Jarrett have made him look paranoid and bitter. His odd exit from WWE left him looking like a ticking time bomb. His on-screen and off-screen marital problems have portrayed him as unstable, and a DUI charge raised questions about his character (he was cleared of all charges last September). Angle is an incredible talent, but he comes with a whole lot of baggage. **GRADE: B**

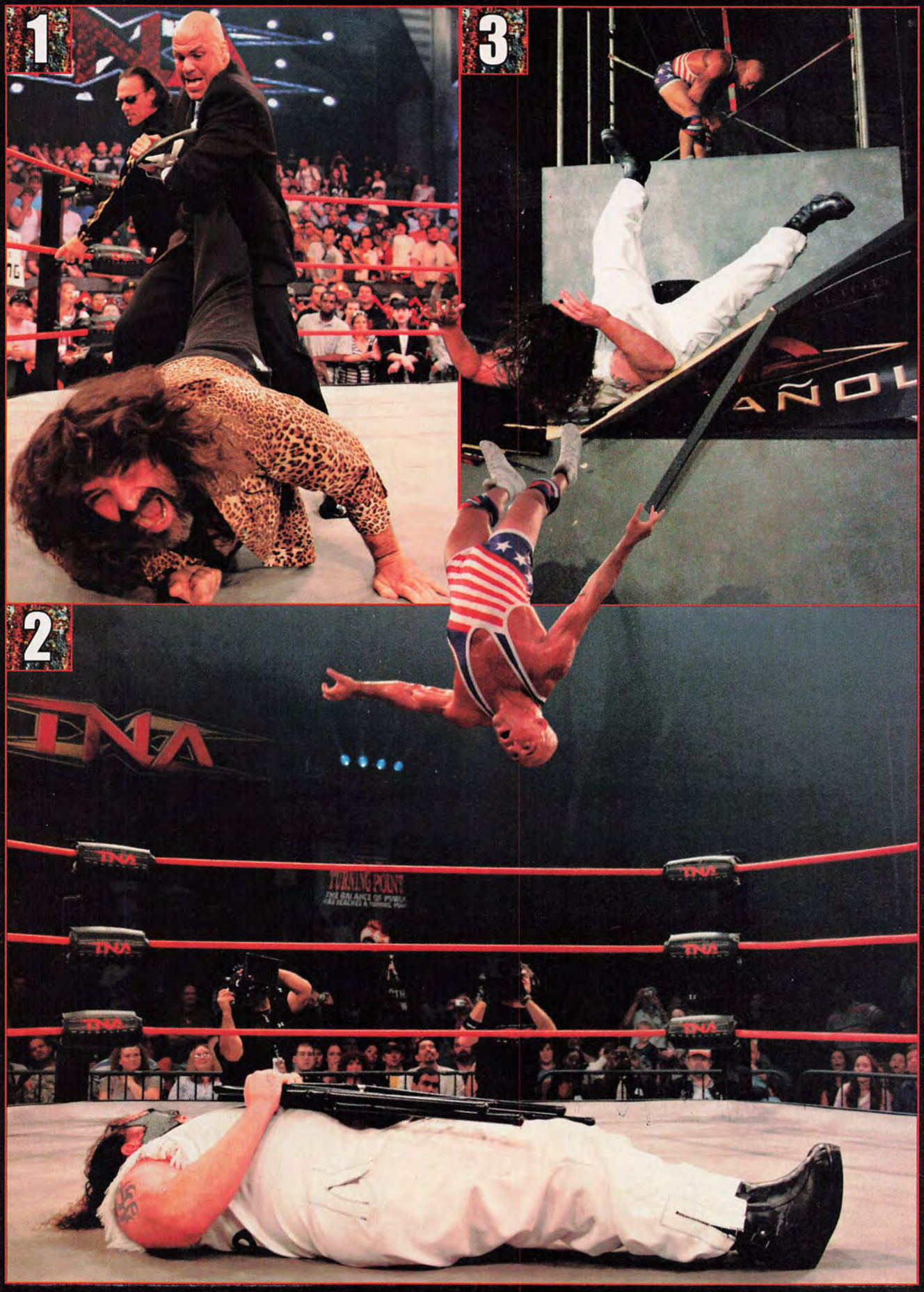
Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: Few people would question Angle's mat wrestling skills. Take down the ropes and go Greco-Roman style, and Angle will beat anyone. Angle can also brawl (see his matches against Abyss and his empty arena bout against Sting) as well as execute a precision moonsault. In fact, there is very little Angle cannot do. Most impressive is his ability to reverse his way out of a variety of moves and sink in a deep anklelock. Criticize his methods or his behavior, but you can't knock his game. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: Angle has completely eliminated the comic relief aspect of his character and positioned himself as a paranoid megalomaniac. He may not hold the TNA World title right now, but there is no question that TNA revolves around him. He stands alone as TNA's top villain and the guy who consistently puts on the Match of the Night at any given event. The fact that he has been able to continue to compete at this level despite his well-documented injuries is truly incredible. Not only is he continuing to build his legacy, but he is also giving back to TNA by bringing the best out of others and adding a layer of unpredictability and unsurpassed skill. **GRADE: A-**

OVERALL VALUE: Angle is still the MVP of TNA. He is the company's best wrestler, its best interview, and (along with Sting and Mick Foley) its biggest marquee star. In fact, he may be even more valuable to TNA without being the World champion, because he seems to influence more storylines and individuals in his current role as MEM kingpin than he did as champion. **GRADE: A**

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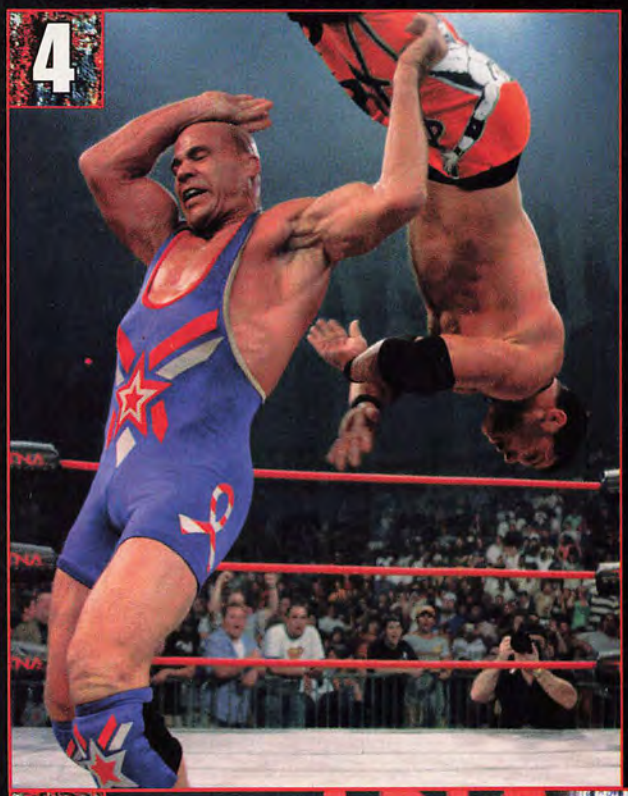

KURT ANGLE

1. Angle can and will snap on his notorious anklelock from just about any position in the ring, and once it's on, there's little hope for escape even for a grizzled vet like Mick Foley.

2. Neck injuries be damned! Kurt will do whatever it takes to beat an opponent—even if it means attempting a risky aerial maneuver like the shooting star press.

3. Angle may be lights-out on the mat, but he can excel in a hardcore environment as well. In fact, there is no style Angle can't adapt to in the ring. It's why many consider him to be the best wrester in TNA and the world.

4. Even though he currently wears no title in TNA, Angle continues to help the promotion by elevating younger stars like A.J. Styles through their intense feuds.

5. Although Kurt's skill level didn't diminish, 2008 was a tough year for the Olympic medalist. Personal problems may have affected his performance in the ring, and he was unable to unseat fellow Main Event Mafia member Sting as TNA World champion.

BEER MONEY INC.

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Say what you will about the arrogant attitudes and questionable tactics of James Storm and Robert Roode. Feel free to debate whether they portray an image that might make some parents think twice about letting their child watch TNA *Impact* rather than WWE's newfound commitment to TV-PG programming. But whatever you do, give credit where it's due to Beer Money Inc. The 2008 *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* Tag Team of the Year has emerged as a dominant and cohesive unit. The two-time TNA World tag team champions are both skilled singles wrestlers, but are greater than the sum of the parts when they team together. As long as the team stays together, many more titles could be in Beer Money's future. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: Individually, Storm's beer-guzzling redneck persona and Roode's misogynistic tycoon image are clearly derivative of wrestling stars of the past. Roode's image in particular is a pastiche of Rick Rude, Ted DiBiase, and Curt "Mr. Perfect" Hennig. But in combination, they have a certain anti-hero appeal to some fans. To others, they are easy to root against. Either way, they make effective heels. And their name alone lends itself to all kinds of creative merchandise. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Many times when two singles wrestlers form a tag team, they lack the sort of chemistry and teamwork that separates the elite units from the rest. Storm and Roode, however, have become a well-oiled (no pun intended) machine. Their DWI finishing move and numerous double-teaming maneuvers are routinely executed with crisp precision and both men are more than adequate brawlers. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Roode and Storm were in danger of getting lost in the mid-card singles shuffle when they formed Beer Money Inc. The early returns were far from stellar, as the team suffered a lengthy losing streak. Since then, the team has proven its critics wrong by rising to the top of TNA's tag team division. They've carved a distinct niche for themselves over the past year. Long term, however, it's likely that one or both men will eye a return to a singles career. **GRADE: A-**

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

OVERALL VALUE: Tag team wrestling has been on the decline in North America for the last decade-plus. Only a few teams, such as Beer Money rivals Team 3-D, have stayed together long enough to make a lasting impression. Whether Storm and Roode remain a team for the long haul remains to be seen. Right now, though, they are more valuable to TNA as a team that can grate on the nerves of fan favorite and rival heel teams alike. Beer Money has shown that it can back up its braggadocio. **GRADE: A**

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BEER MONEY INC.

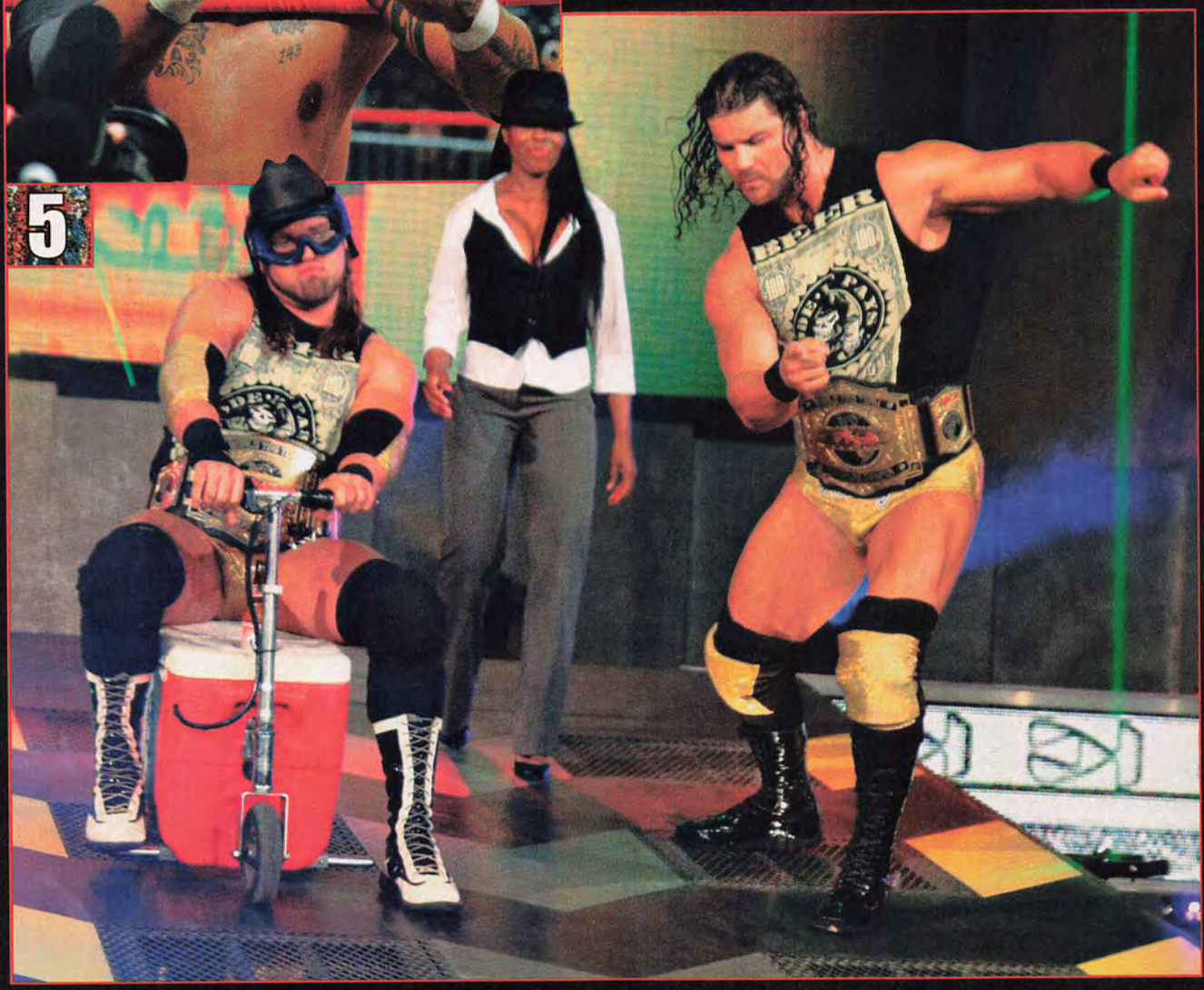
1. Wrestling isn't always about strong grappling or awe-inspiring aerial moves. Sometimes, fans just want to be entertained. Despite their questionable behavior, Roode and Storm's anti-hero edge has an appeal similar to "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin's.

2. Regardless of how Beer Money Inc. gets the job done, the bottom line is Roode and Storm have hovered around the TNA tag team title for the better part of 12 months. That's a testament to just how far Roode and Storm have progressed as a unit.

3. The pairing of a beer-guzzling redneck and Wall Street tycoon may seem incongruous, but Storm and Roode complement each other as wrestlers and characters. Their teamwork has played a big part in their rise to the top of TNA.

4. When Beer Money Inc. fails to get in the heads or under the skin of their opponents, neither Roode nor Storm have a problem bending the rules to inflict physical damage.

5. Whatever marketability Storm and Roode lack individually, their partnership makes up for. Beer Money Inc. is simply one of those tag teams that commands attention, whether positive or negative.



JOHN CENA

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: With another year under his belt, John Cena has further solidified his position as the franchise player of the Raw brand. He consistently draws the loudest ovations (and the jeers have lessened noticeably) and is almost always in the thick of the main-event scene. But the past year has been a rocky one. He came up short in a feud with JBL and was sidelined for two months with a herniated disc. He beat Jericho to regain the World championship at Survivor Series, but his reign lasted just three months until Edge relieved him of the belt. For a franchise player, three months as champion in more than a year is rather unimpressive. **GRADE: B-**

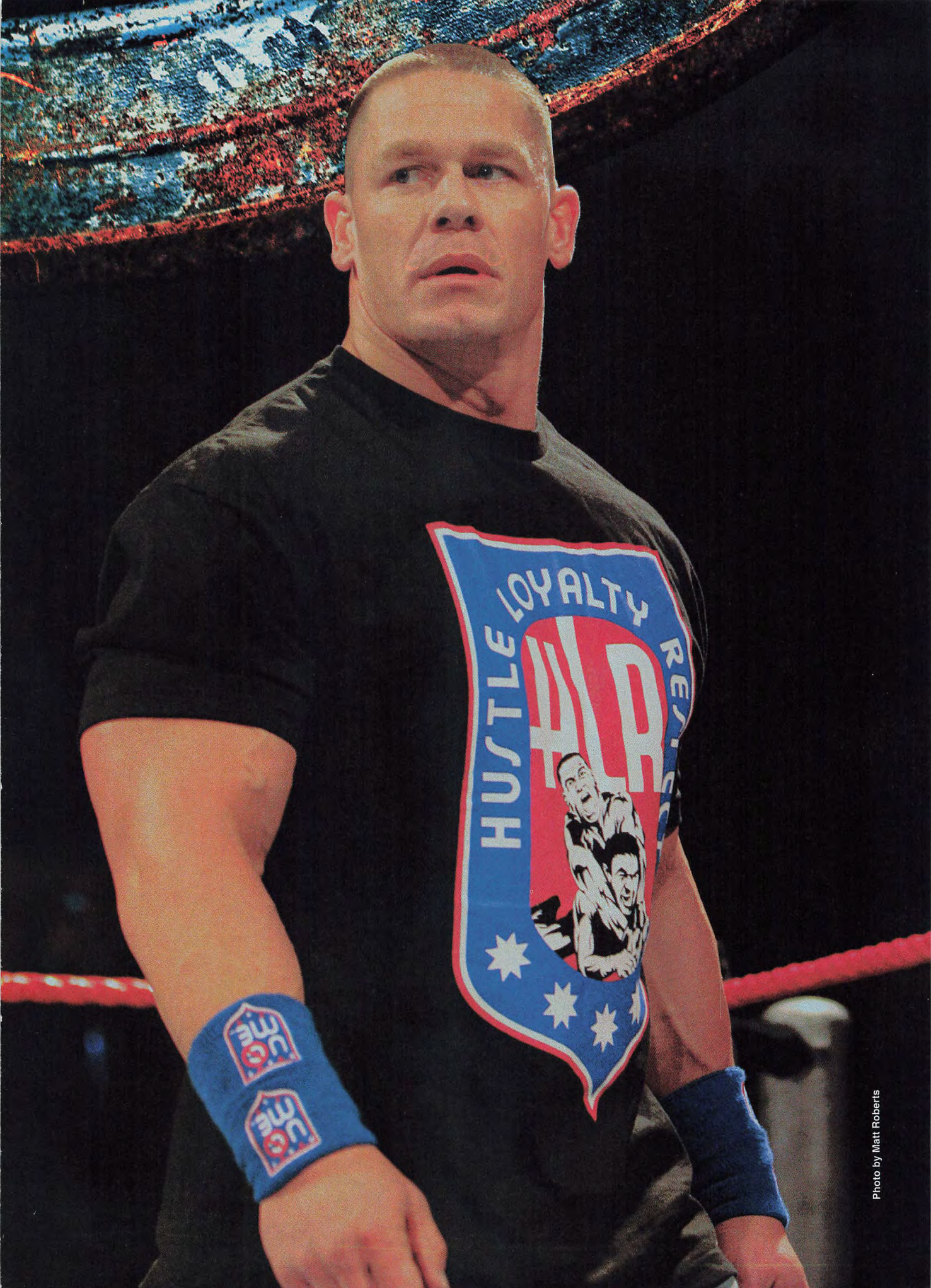
MARKETABILITY: You've got to give Cena his props—not a lot of wrestlers could make the old AWA logo fashionable again, but Cena has taken his passion for throwbacks and made a variation of the old-school logo trendy. No one sells more merchandise than Cena, and no one has had the crossover appeal that Cena has displayed. His second feature film, *12 Rounds*, was rolling into the theaters just weeks after Cena scored a cameo appearance on *Saturday Night Live*. From a marketing perspective, Cena is a phenomenon. **GRADE: A+**

Photo by Matt Roberts

REPERTOIRE: We haven't seen Cena add anything new to his game in a while—except for changing the names of his moves. But, as the old saying goes, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." His power game is nicely complimented by his submission moves, which he can throw in at any point. Some may say he is one-dimensional—and they would be correct—but that one-dimension gets the job done. If Cena wants to become as dominant as he once was, however, he's going to need to add something new that his opponents haven't been able to scout for the past five years. Yes, he's passionate, and yes, he's gutsy, but Cena will never be a true ring technician or a rock-solid fundamental grappler. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: Cena is showing he can be a utility player and that he doesn't need a title belt to remain popular with the fans. That's a good thing; it shows the fans care about him as a competitor and also that he has the potential to be a long-term attraction. But now that he has proven himself and silenced his critics somewhat, he needs to put together another long world championship reign and prove he has what it takes to survive at the top without getting hurt and without dropping matches to a lesser competitor like JBL. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: Cena is a major money-earner and a solid ambassador for WWE with the mainstream media. He's attractive, personable, and he is a great company man. There are still a lot of fans that refuse to warm up to him, though. There are people who resent his frequent forays into film and TV. His criticisms of The Rock aside, one can't help but wonder if Cena's ultimate goal is to use wrestling a steppingstone to a career in Hollywood. He has been known to underachieve for long stretches of time and doesn't seem to care. He suffers frequent injuries, and then misses time to shoot movies, but he's a star and he earns a lot of money for WWE. **GRADE: A**



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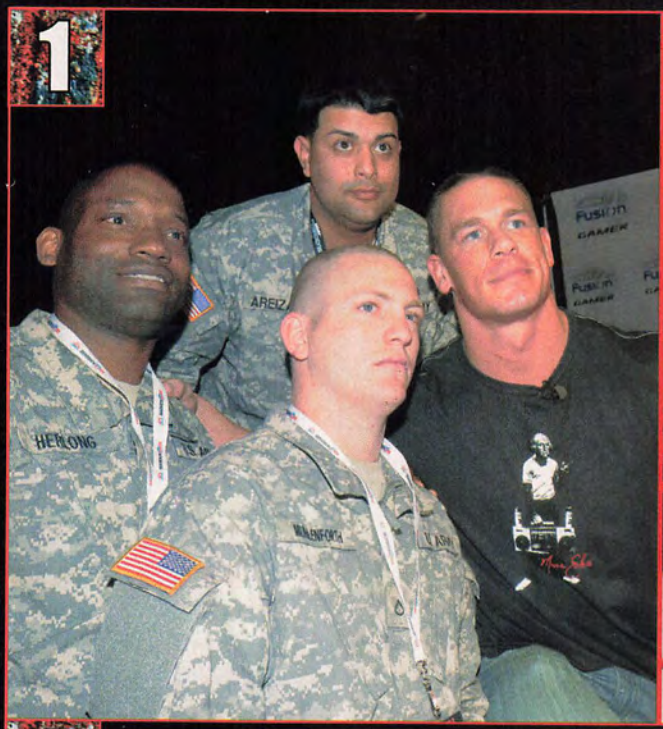
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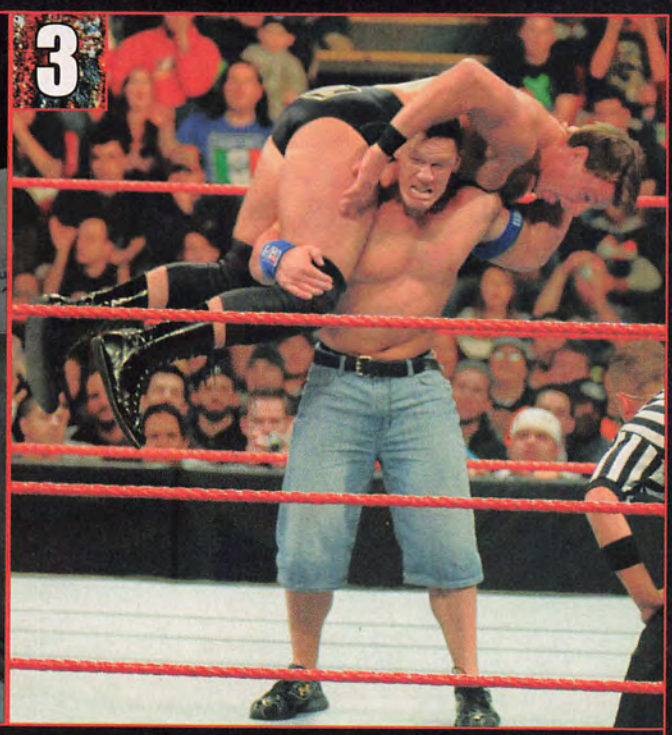
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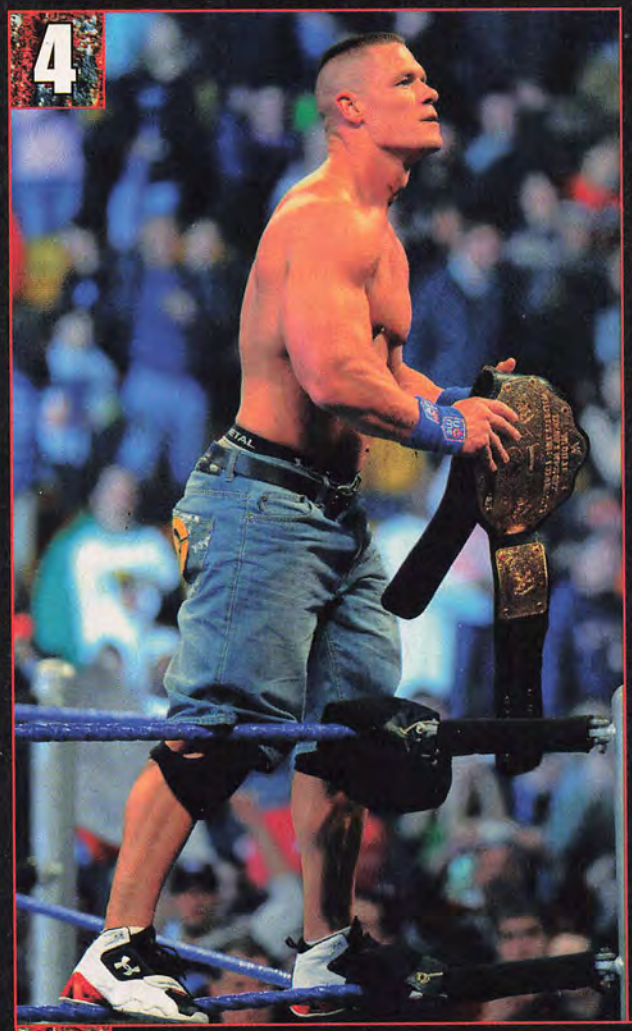

JOHN CENA

1 John Cena's appeal extends beyond WWE to non-wrestling events such as commercial projects, and movies. "The Champ" was a big hit with U.S. servicemen at a recent Gillette Co. promotion. It's no wonder he has become the poster boy for Raw.

Photo courtesy of The Gillette Company

2 Cena's remarkable power transforms routine maneuvers like a simple punch into lethal setup and finishing moves. Strength is at the core of Cena's success and as long as he can avoid serious injury, Cena should be a driving force on Raw for years to come.

Photo by George Napolitano

3 One of Cena's limitations is his limited repertoire. His moves can be called basic and predictable, but they're often effective enough to get the job done. In some ways, Cena deserves credit for wrestling within his abilities.

Photo by George Napolitano

4 One of the highest, and lowest, moments of this past year for Cena was winning the WWE World championship. Coming back after a severe neck injury, Cena showed the determination it takes to become champion by beating Chris Jericho to regain the title. But just as quickly as he won it, Cena lost the belt to Edge in a controversial ruling at No Way Out.

Photo by George Napolitano

5 Part of Cena's march to the top of Raw involved winning the World tag team title with Batista. Unfortunately, Cena's reign as tag team champ would be short-lived and he would eventually face "The Animal" at SummerSlam.

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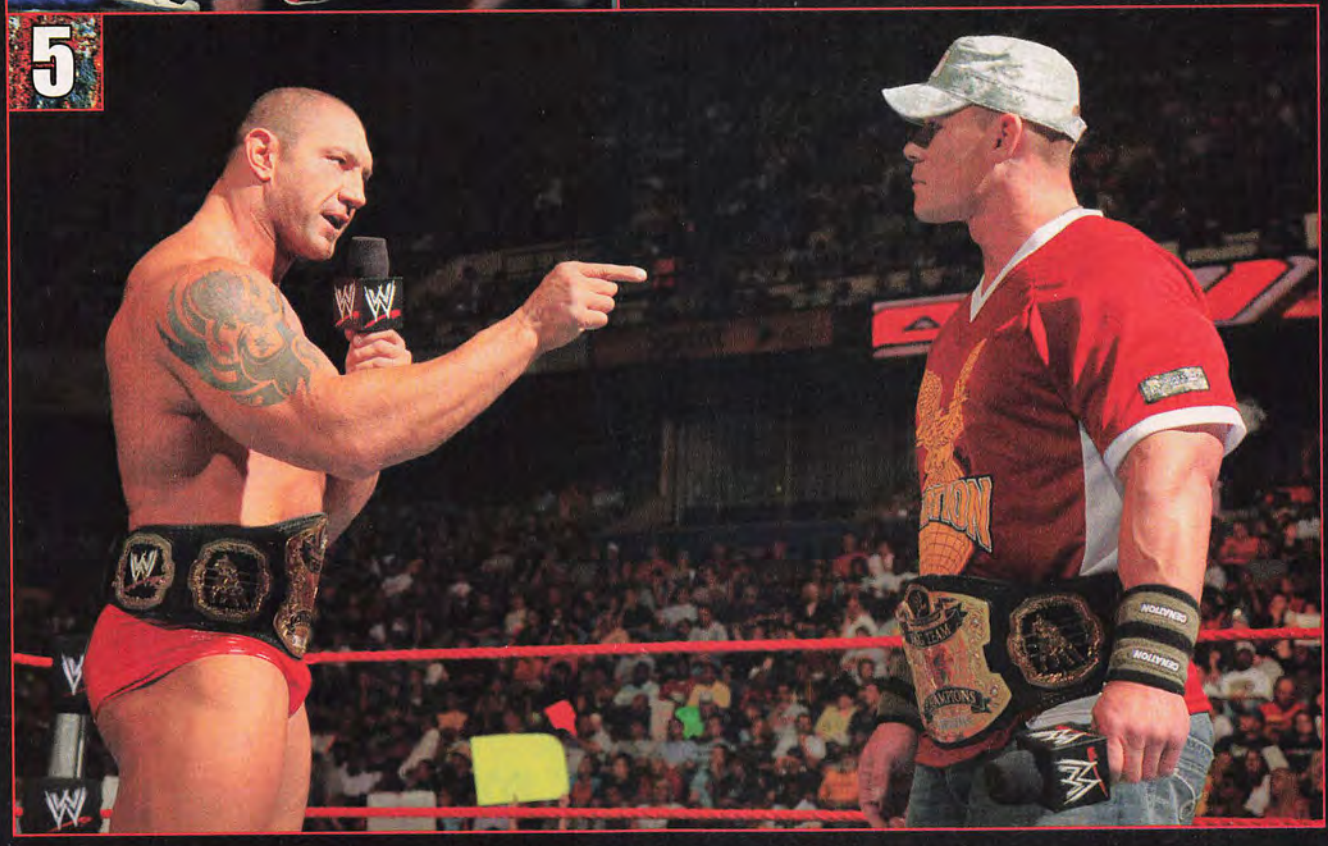


EDGE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: How many men can come back from being sent to the fiery depths of hell to become the champion of WWE's flagship brand? The Undertaker managed to best Edge at SummerSlam, but wrestling's "Ultimate Opportunist" got the last laugh. With Vickie Guerrero stepping in to replace Stephanie McMahon as Raw's interim GM, Edge has spread his power and influence across both the Raw and Smackdown brands. Guerrero's dalliance with The Big Show put his championship in jeopardy, but it was a relatively minor hiccup in an otherwise flawless return from the abyss. **GRADE: B+**

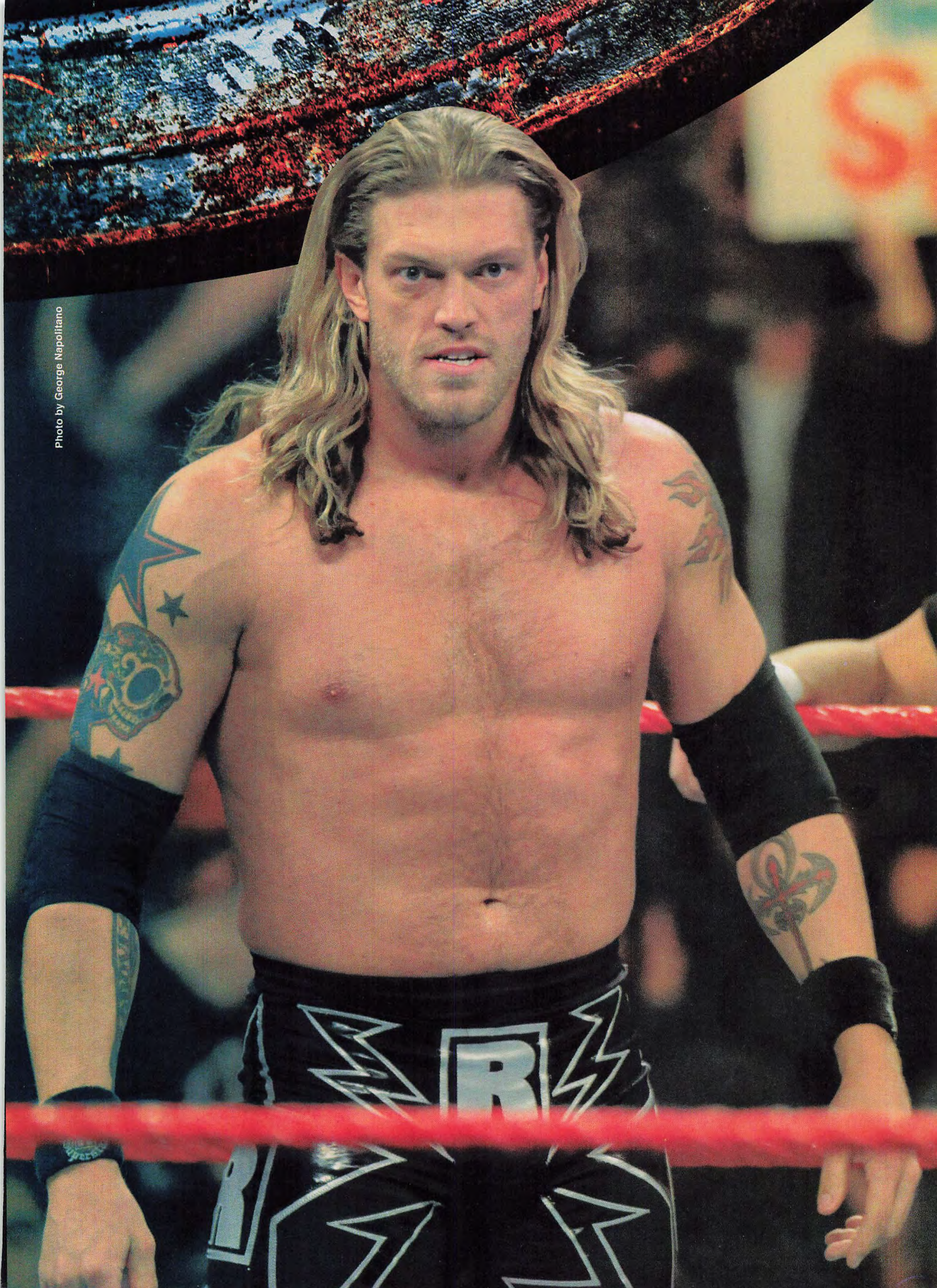
MARKETABILITY: The "Rated R Superstar" is one of the best monikers in wrestling, and it looks great on a T-shirt. Edge acquits himself very well with the mainstream media and has proven himself as a top draw on two brands. He's the wrestler fans love to hate, and are willing to pay good money to see get his comeuppance. It would be interesting to see how much more marketable he could be if he got himself into the good graces of the fans, but based on his track record, that's not very likely to happen. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Edge is perennially underrated. He's generally not considered to be a superior mat technician, but he has held his own against everyone from Kurt Angle to Chris Benoit. He's not considered a true high-flier, but he helped re-invent the TLC match by launching himself fearlessly off ladders and the top turnbuckle. He's not considered particularly powerful, but his spear has leveled Batista, The Undertaker, and John Cena. He is versatile and well-rounded, though no one aspect of his game particularly stands out above the rest. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: It's hard to believe, but Edge is already an eight-time world champion. The loss to The Undertaker could have derailed Edge's career, but he bided his time and returned with maximum impact. After two years on the Smackdown brand, Edge made it back to Raw and immediately inserted himself into the title picture. Not only did he claim another world title, but he also made the world forget all about that brutal loss to 'Taker. He won the most visible championship in wrestling and salvaged his career at the same time. **GRADE: A**

Photo by George Napolitano

OVERALL VALUE: It wasn't all that long ago when experts wondered if Edge truly had the ingredients to become a world champion. Much like Jeff Hardy in recent years, Edge had come maddeningly close to the brass ring, only to fall short time after time. The "Money In The Bank" win kicked Edge's career into high gear, and he never looked back. Less than three years later, Edge has headlined WrestleMania, won multiple world titles, and established himself as one of the most successful heels in WWE history. His willingness to switch brands and to sink to any level to achieve his ends has made him a valuable commodity for WWE. **GRADE: A**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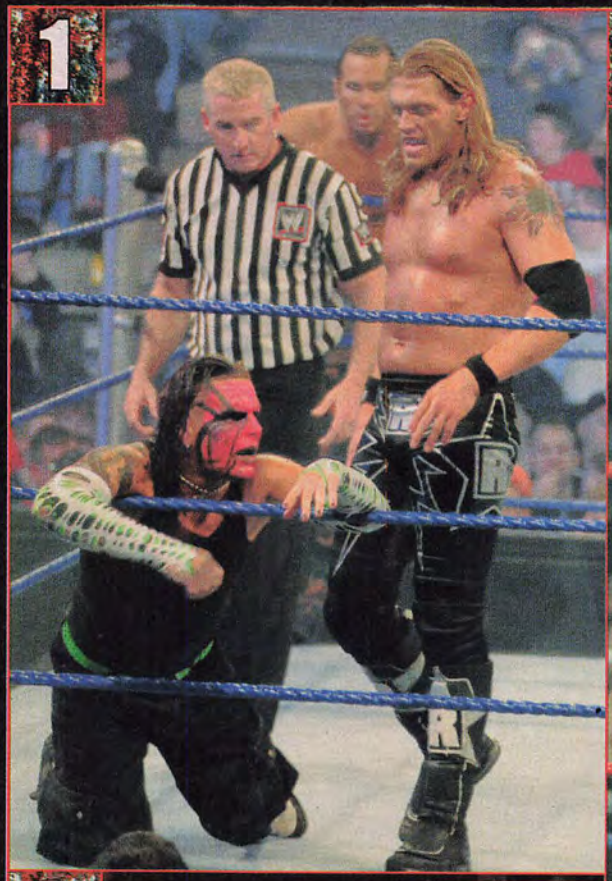
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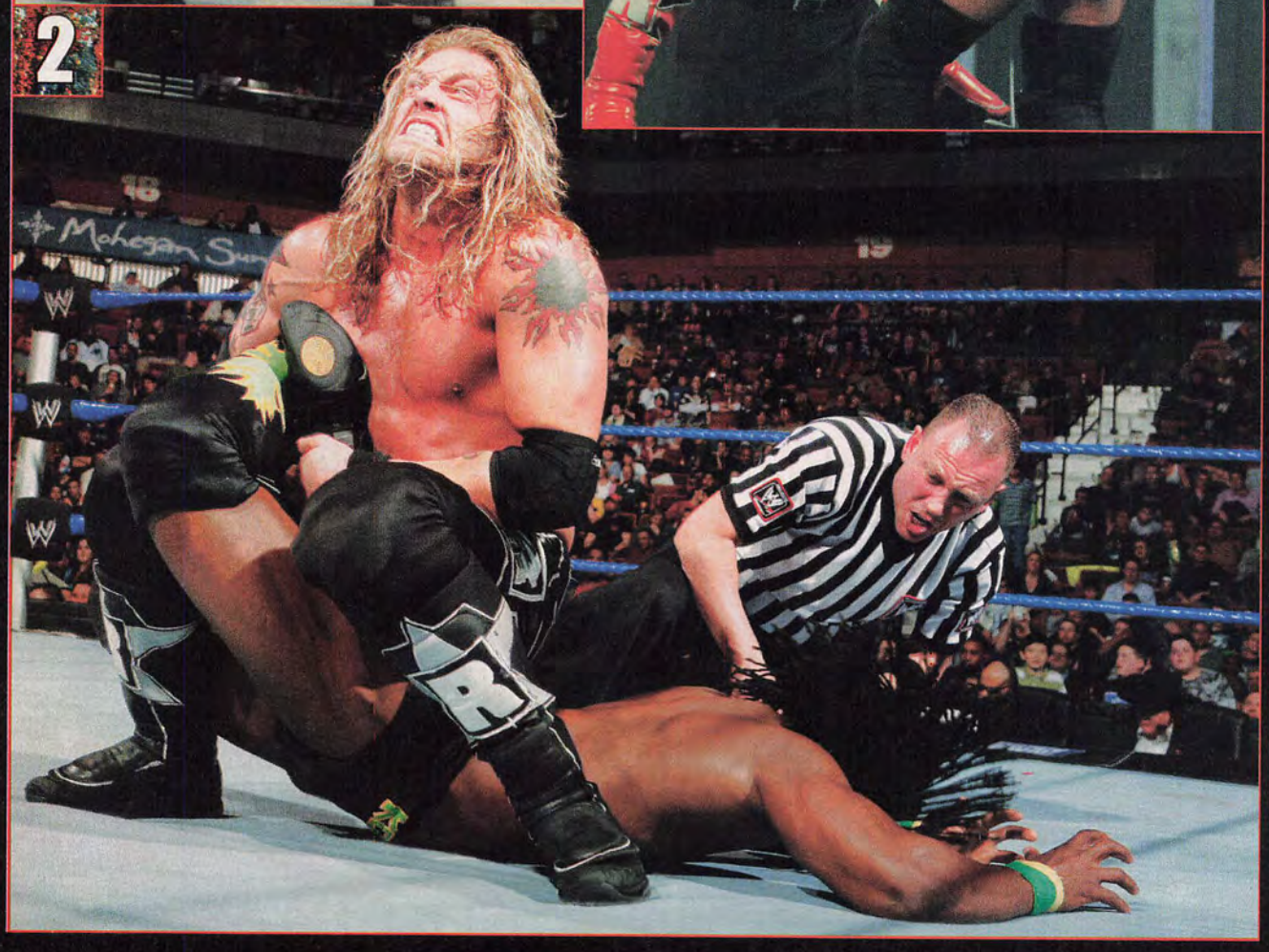
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EDGE

1 Jeff Hardy gave Edge all he could handle in their feud. If it wasn't for a timely chair shot from Matt Hardy at the Royal Rumble, Edge may have never been able to take back his WWE championship. Then again, what should fans expect of wrestling's "Ultimate Opportunist"?
Photo by George Napolitano

2 Curiously, many people underestimate Edge's abilities. But a careful examination of his game shows that while he may not dominate in any one particular facet, he's a versatile wrestler who does many things very well.
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3 On the ground or in the air, Edge fearlessly does it all. As Triple-H found out, the "Rated R Superstar" isn't afraid to climb the ropes to dish out punishment.
Photo by George Napolitano

4 There is more than just an intense desire to win that's driving Edge. Just listen to any of his promos and it's easy to recognize his passion for the sport. Love him or hate him, Edge is one of the premier competitors both in the ring and on the mike.
Photo by George Napolitano

5 Edge has earned a justifiable reputation among fans for being a fast friend and unreliable ally. Just weeks after benefiting from Matt Hardy's attack on brother Jeff, Edge did his best to decimate Matt in the ring.
Photo by George Napolitano

CHRIS JERICHO

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Chris Jericho is the voice calling out in the wilderness. He called out Shawn Michaels for retiring Ric Flair, then called Michaels a hypocrite and an egomaniac. To be perfectly honest, some of the things Jericho said had the ring of truth (such as when he correctly accused Michaels of faking his knee injury against Batista). His direct honesty cost him his fans, so Jericho went out and won the WWE World championship. Through the second half of 2008, Jericho was the top villain on Raw. He collected two world titles, then tried to launch one of the most controversial matches in WrestleMania history by picking a fight with actor Mickey Rourke. His planned faceoff against Roddy Piper, Jimmy Snuka, and Ricky Steamboat at 'Mania was a major step down. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: During his brief sabbatical from wrestling, Jericho tried his hand at realty TV, wrote a terrific autobiography, and became a regular pop culture commentator on VH1. He has the charisma and star quality, and his war of words with Rourke and the height of the actor's popularity only added to his mainstream renown. **GRADE: A**

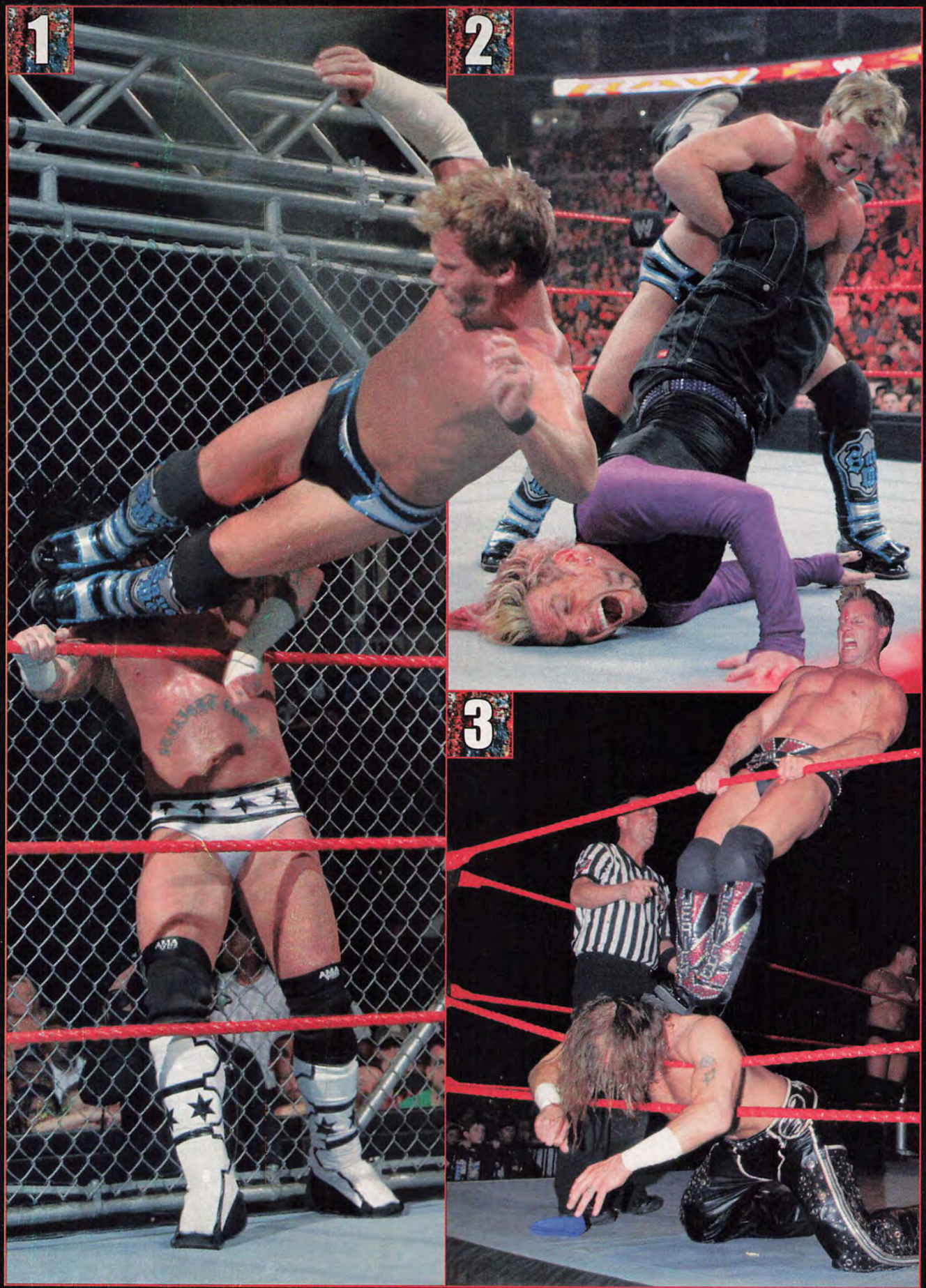
REPERTOIRE: Jericho has traveled the globe and been influenced by virtually every style of wrestling there is. He has faced a more diverse variety of competition and styles over the course of his career than perhaps any other wrestler of this era. There is very little an opponent can do that surprises him and few moves he cannot counter. He has changed his game by reducing his high-risk aerial moves and focusing on savvy mat wrestling and damaging knee strikes. This new style has helped him reduce the risk of injury and—as his feud with Batista proved—it can still allow him to succeed against larger competitors. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Last year was a banner year for Jericho. His long-awaited WWE return had an electrifying start but fizzled quickly. Jericho responded by altering his style and becoming more aggressive. Those changes put him in the 2008 Feud of the Year (as voted by *PWI* readers) and earned him a pair of championships. It also re-established him as a main-event level competitor and put him in prime position for many more years of elite level competition. **GRADE: A+**

Photo by George Napolitano

OVERALL VALUE: WWE survived with Jericho once, and the company could certainly survive without him again. But Jericho brings something very unique to the table. Not only can he produce competitive and exciting matches against anyone on the WWE roster, but he also exudes believability. When Jericho denounces someone—Michaels, the legends, the fans—he fluently makes his argument and you get the sense he passionately believes in every word he utters. Jericho comes across as genuine and determined; he's not "playing a character," he's being himself. And that sort of believability takes his matches and feuds to a different level than the average grudge match. **GRADE: A**

Photo by George Napolitano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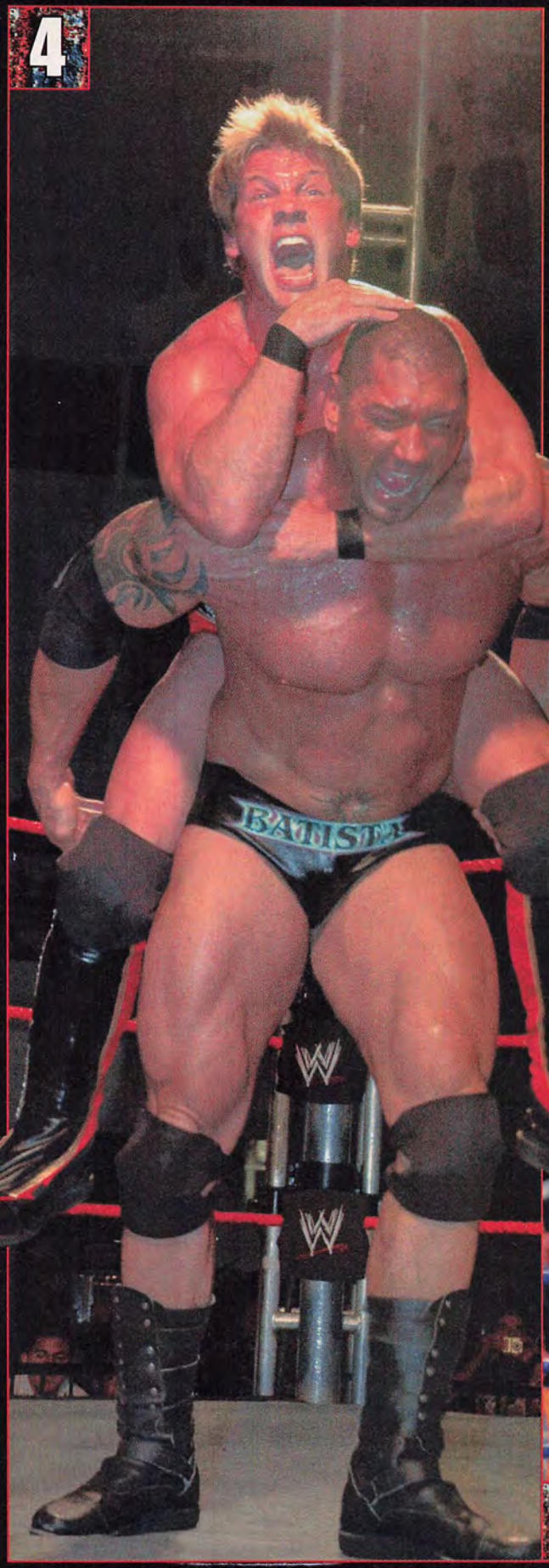
CHRIS JERICHO



1 This isn't your run-of-the-mill cage match. When Jericho and Punk locked horns, Y2J poured his heart and soul into the feud—just as he does in all his feuds. Jericho's passion, while infuriating, makes him a special wrestler.

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2 Few wrestlers can ground the high-flying Jeff Hardy, but Chris Jericho is one of them. Jericho is one of wrestling's most experienced and adept practitioners of mat wrestling.

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3 Perhaps the only thing standing between Jericho and another WWE World title is his obsession with humiliating the legends of the sport, such as Shawn Michaels. Instead of setting his sights on titleholders Triple-H or Edge at WM25, Jericho targeted retired wrestlers Ric Flair, Rick Steamboat, Roddy Piper, and Jimmy Snuka.

Photo by George Napolitano

4 Jericho's goofy antics have changed over the years, but his intensity has not. Strong belief in himself plus a ferocious sense of competition have enabled the smallish Jericho to compete against and defeat men such as Batista.

Photo By Shane M. Kidder

5 An advancing John Cena seemingly falls prey to a Jericho Codebreaker. Cena found out the hard way just how underrated Jericho's defensive skills are.

Photo by George Napolitano

RANDY ORTON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Last year, Randy Orton had just proclaimed the dawn of "The Age Of Orton" when Triple-H relieved him of his WWE championship and broke Orton's collarbone. The title loss, coupled with the injury, came just as Orton was establishing himself as the top star in WWE and shortly after he was named number-one in the 2008 "*PWI* 500." Since then, he has formed the Legacy to help watch his back, stood up to the McMahon family, and won the Royal Rumble. He is poised to pick up just where he left off, only with more violence and more allies. It may have been delayed, but "The Age Of Orton" is now upon us. **GRADE: A**

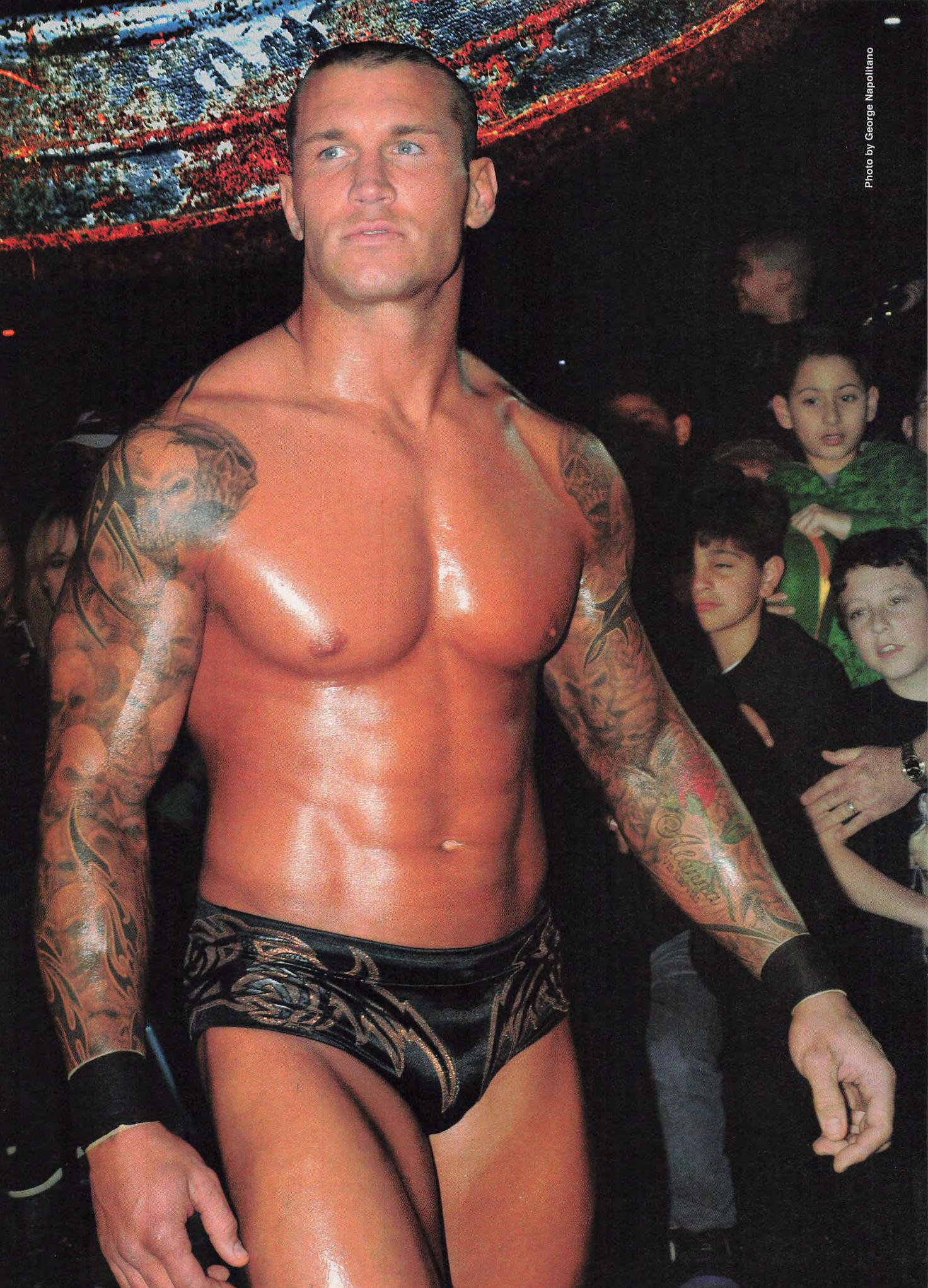
MARKETABILITY: Orton is WWE's top anti-hero. He is unrepentantly evil and seems to take a perverse joy in doling out concussions and hospitalizing the people who stand in his way. His charisma is undeniable, and he has a growing cult following. Orton is an ideal villain—believable, cunning, and dangerous. In some ways, he's as close to a pre-babyface turn "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin as WWE has seen in the past decade. He'll probably never be as marketable as Austin was, but there's no question he's near the top of the heap among today's competitors. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: One of the most underappreciated aspects of Orton's game is the depth of his arsenal. Every few years, Orton develops lethal new finishers and effective, if understated, wear-down holds. He can hit the RKO at virtually any point in a match, which allows him to beat opponents without the necessity of wearing them down first. He has an assortment of neckbreakers he can use to prime an opponent for the RKO or to leave them in position for his running punt to the head. The wheelbarrow suplex from his OVW days and his flying bodypress earned him plenty of wins early in his career, and simple clubbing blows like his version of the Garvin stomp or his European uppercut are extremely effective. Orton's lanky physique and tendon strength give him a significant leverage advantage over most opponents, making his chinlocks, headlocks, and legscissors even more damaging. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: People expected great things from Orton the moment the third-generation competitor made his pro debut. The 2001 *PWI* Rookie of the Year has already surpassed all expectations. A three-t ime world champion, Orton is just hitting his stride. **GRADE: A+**

OVERALL VALUE: Orton is simply the most well-rounded competitor in the sport today. He's also arguably the most effective heel in the business. Triple-H and the McMahons may hate him, but he's one of WWE's most valued commodities. **GRADE: A**

Photo by Matt Roberts



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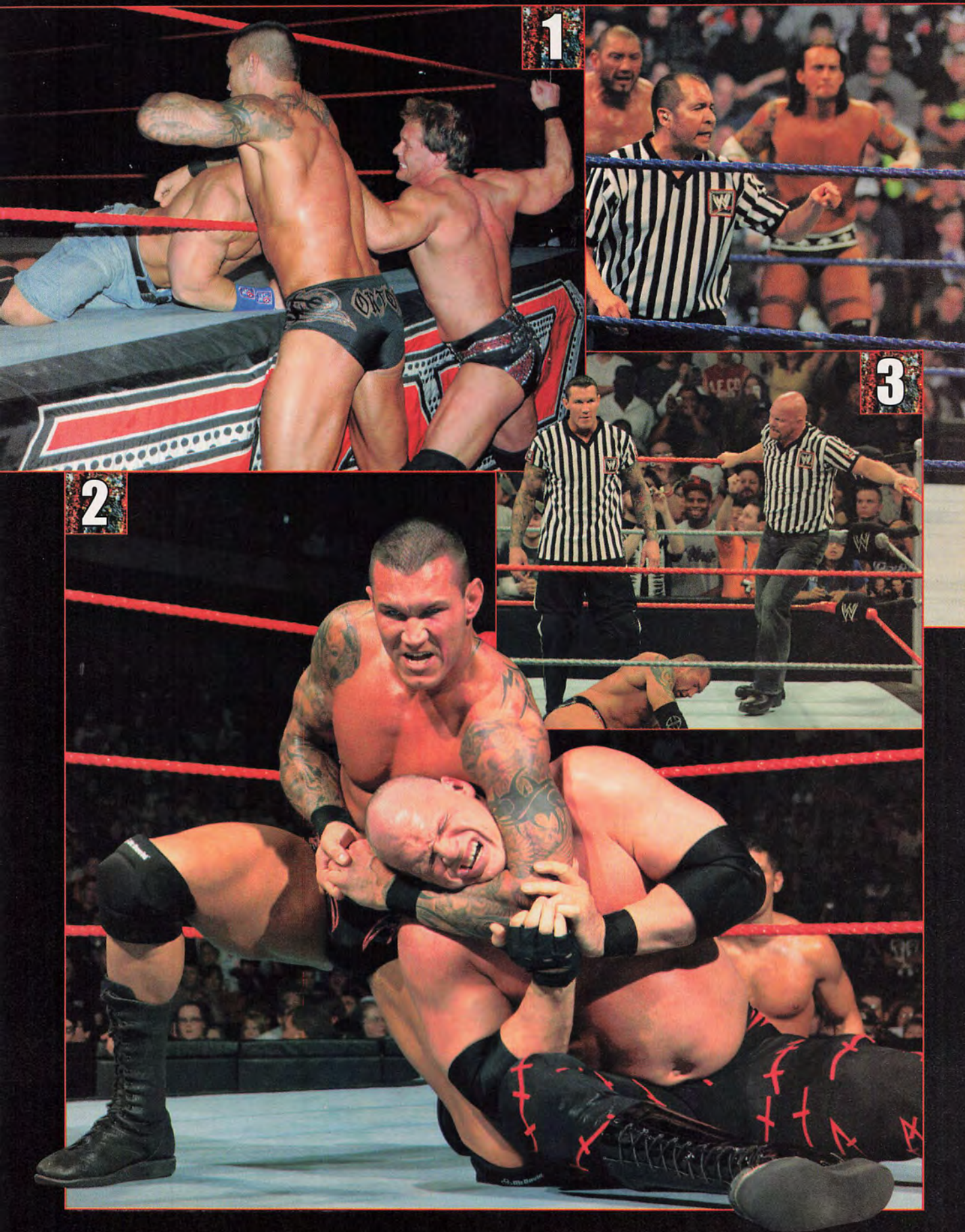
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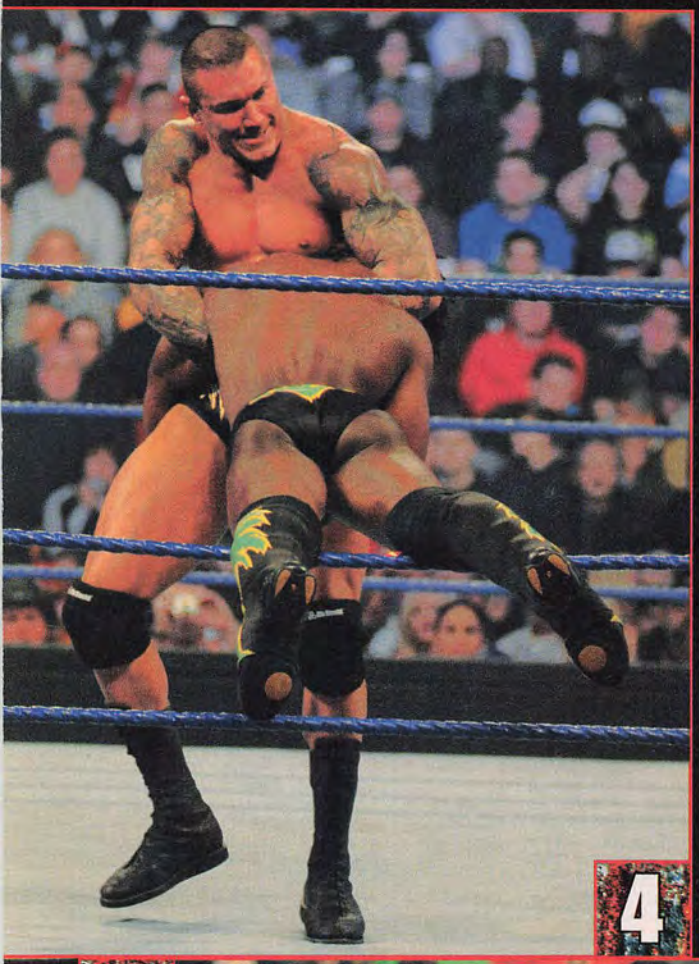

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It's difficult to imagine that a wrestler as self-centered and arrogant as Orton would have even a passing interest in tag team wrestling, but Orton has partnered with Chris Jericho, who helped Orton settle his feud with John Cena.

Photo by George Napolitano

2

Earlier in his career, Orton caught flack from some fans for his use of boring wear-down holds like this side headlock. To his credit, Orton never let this criticism derail his approach in the ring. How can anyone argue with the results?

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3

Orton may not yet be as marketable as "Stone-Cold" was, but he has proven that his bad boy image sells. Despite his often despicable behavior, throngs of fans have thrown their support behind the "Legend Killer."

Photo by George Napolitano

4

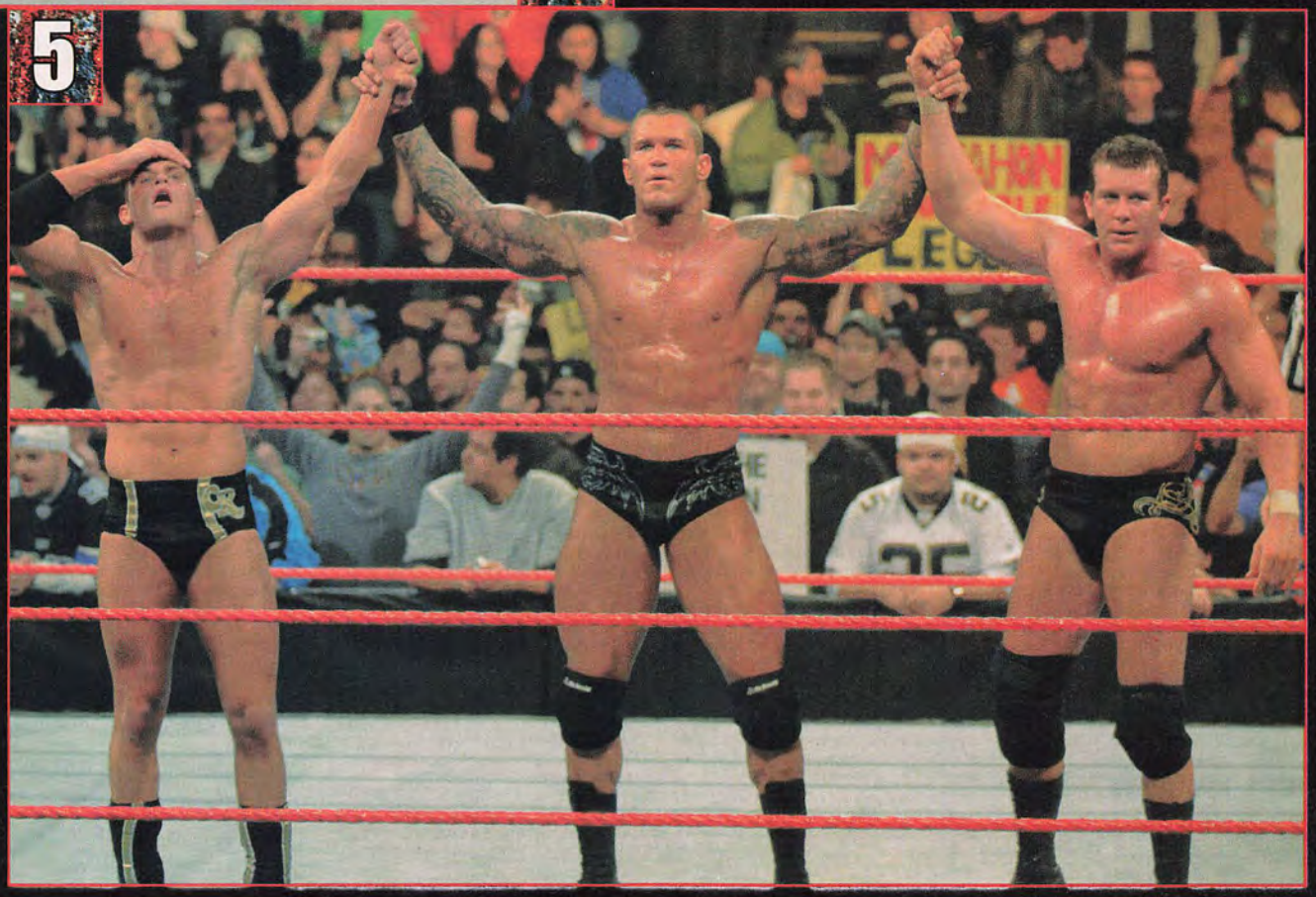
The most underappreciated area of Orton's game is his repertoire. Not only does he regularly add more moves, he also has become adept at coming up with moves on the fly, such as this DDT through the ropes. Orton can end his opponents' night from just about any position in the ring.

Photo by George Napolitano

5

If we gave out grades for manipulation, Orton's score would be off the charts. Somehow, he's managed to convince Cody Rhodes and Ted DiBiase Jr.—two ambitious and talented wrestlers—to remain loyal members of his Legacy faction.

Photo by George Napolitano



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Jan. 1992: The LOD's Championship Catastrophe: Overpowered By The Natural Disasters. Also: Johnny B. Badd, Mr. Hughes, Jake Roberts, Ronnie Gossett.

Feb. 1992: Shocking WWF Report: McMahon Offers Bounty On Flair—Will Vince Pay The Piper? Also: Ron Simmons, Tito Santana, Bob Backlund, R. Steiner-Abdullah.

March 1992: After Survivor Series & Tuesday In Texas: Has The WWF Title Suffered Irreparable Damage? Also: Brian Pillman, Anderson & Bruiser, Rude-Sting, Mountie-Hart, Jeff Jarrett.

April 1992: After A Year Of Tragedy & Turmoil: The Magic Is Back In WCW! Also: Chris Candido, Paul Orndorff, Lady X, Paul Bearer, Hennig & Flair, Michaels & Jannetty.

Dec. 1992: He's *Baaaaaack!* Jake Roberts Slithers Into WCW. Also: Paul E. Dangerously, Ron Simmons, Hulk Hogan, Michaels-Martel, Gilberts-Rock 'n' Rolls.

June 1992: In Ric Flair's High-Stakes Championship Game, Hulk Hogan & Sid Justice Are Mere Pawns. Also: Eddie Gilbert, Ultimate Warrior, Vinnie Vegas, WCW titles, Koko B. Ware.

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TRIPLE-H

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Triple-H may have switched brands, but the move from Raw to Smackdown did nothing to curb his winning ways. HHH quickly established himself as the top dog on Smackdown and collected his 13th world championship. For the first time in four years, Triple-H went into WrestleMania as a defending champion instead of a challenger. The only goal he failed to achieve was to be the ratings savior WWE executives hoped he would be. Smackdown ratings have sagged in recent months; and not even Triple-H's star power has been able to turn the tide. **GRADE: B+**

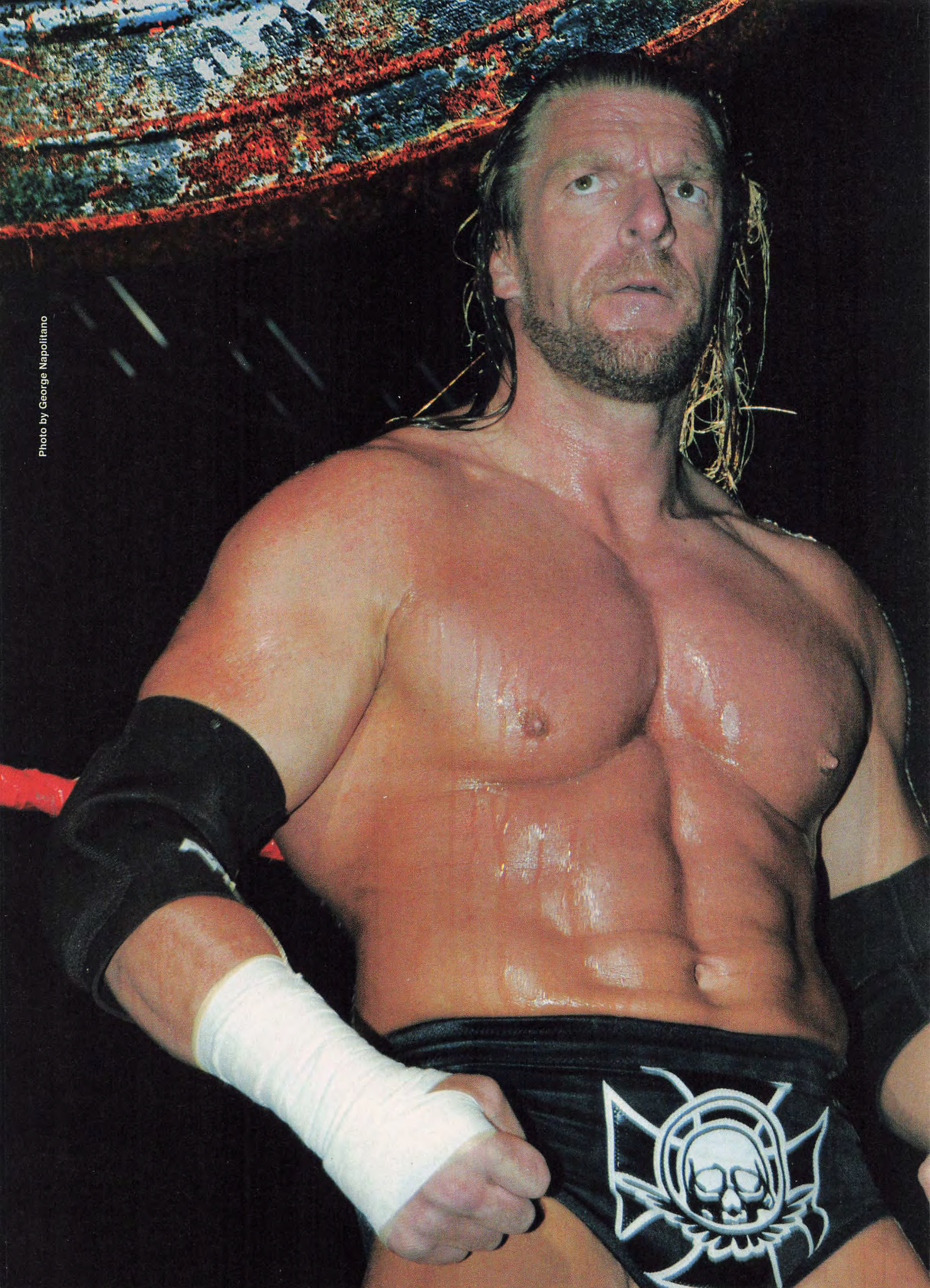
MARKETABILITY: It seems inevitable that Triple-H will surpass Ric Flair's 16 world championships. HHH has been the most hated man in WWE, and he's been the most popular man in WWE. He has consistently been one of the top merchandise-movers over the past decade, and has headlined more pay-per-views than anyone else in pro wrestling. He's also dabbled in acting. If he didn't earn money for the company or at least increase its profile, he wouldn't have had the career he's had. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Pay close attention to Triple-H and you'll notice he always keeps his head up. Even when he's taking a beating or being thrown into the ropes, he doesn't let his head sag. He is constantly watching his opponent and looking for openings. When thrown off the ropes, he remains vigilant for opportunities to counter with a high knee or a shoulder block. When an opponent charges, he instantly determines the man's center of gravity to decide whether he should counter with a spinebuster, a backdrop, or a kick to the midsection. He melds power with technical know-how, and has the overall awareness to know what tactics to employ when. Few can match him in arsenal depth or ring generalship. **GRADE: A+**

Photo by George Napolitano

CAREER GROWTH: The move to Smackdown represented a huge opportunity for HHH. The blue brand has long been considered WWE's "B brand." By sending Triple-H (and Jim Ross) there, it showed that WWE was committed to overcoming that perception by putting one of its most valuable performers on that roster. This is HHH's opportunity to anchor a brand and take it to a new level. For all his achievements, Triple-H has always been overshadowed by others, from Steve Austin and The Rock to Batista and John Cena. Now he has a chance to show he can carry a brand on his own. Thus far, the results have been inconclusive. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: He'll always have the critics who say he leveraged his family connections to earn his current spot, but anyone who questions his overall value to WWE simply is wrong. Triple-H is no angel, but he's a proven draw, a superior in-ring performer, and one of the most effective speakers in the business. There may be haters, but make no mistake—every wrestler wants to achieve what HHH has, and every promotion would love to have HHH on its roster. **GRADE: A**



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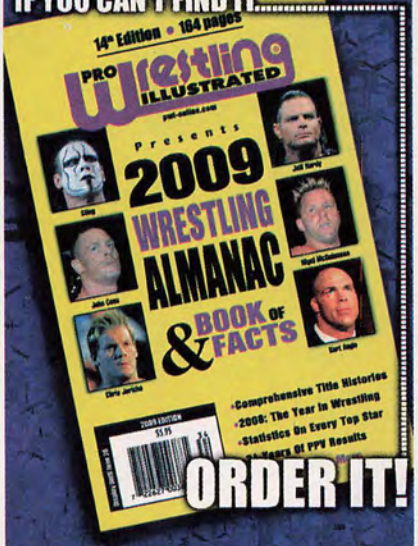

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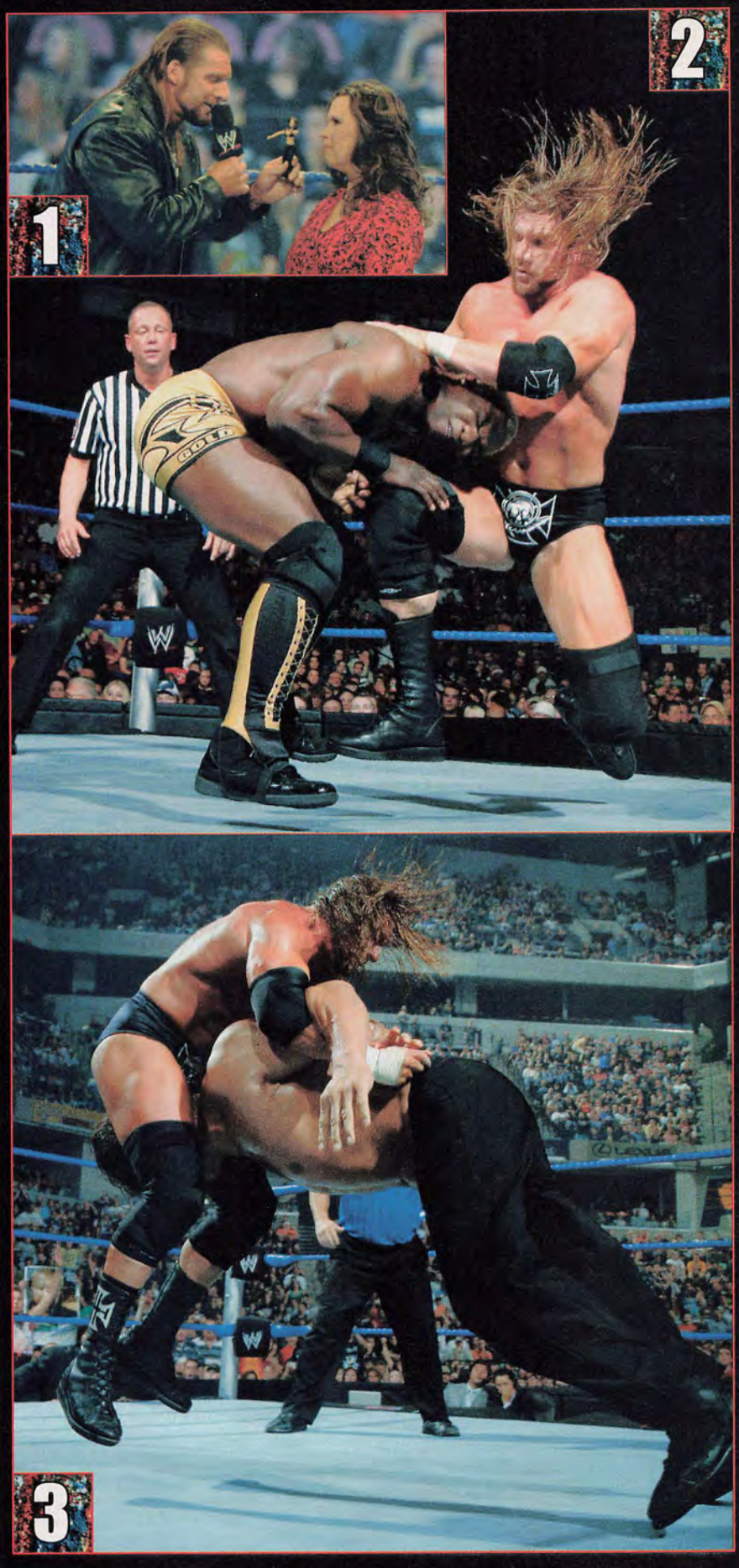

TRIPLE-H

1 Not only is Triple-H a star in the ring, he's great on the mike as well. When Triple-H speaks, people listen. His ability to convey a wide range of emotions make HHH's promos must-see programming.

Photo by George Napolitano

2 They don't call him the "Cerebral Assassin" for nothing. Triple-H has been around long enough to have mastered the art of the counter. From any angle at any time, Triple-H can get right back into the thick of a match with as little as a knee to the face.

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3 Triple-H earns high praise for the mind games he plays, but opponents shouldn't forget about his physical prowess. The implications of Helmsley's Pedigree are far more physical than mental.

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4 Fans were once again treated to the best of Triple-H in his pre-WrestleMania buildup with Randy Orton. "The Legend Killer" and "The Game" proved to be formidable opponents as each pushed the other to their limits both physically and mentally.

Photo by George Napolitano

5 Few wrestlers have the wherewithal to face and beat three wrestlers on one card, but that's exactly what Triple-H did on a recent Smackdown card. There's no secret as to why WWE made Helmsley the new cornerstone of the blue brand.

Photo by George Napolitano

AWESOME KONG

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Kong squashed Taylor Wilde, ran Gail Kim out of TNA, destroyed ODB, and made Sojourner Bolt look like a rookie. Her Knockouts title seems so secure in her grasp that TNA might as well just retire the belt. Yet, still, Awesome Kong doesn't quite seem as dominant as she did one year ago. She is rumored to have suffered a back injury, though neither she nor Raisha Saeed will confirm those reports nor comment on the severity of the injury. Kong is still a juggernaut, but she has shown she is susceptible to upsets and injuries. She's formidable, but no longer considered unbeatable. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: When TNA released its *Knocked Out* DVD last year, Karen Angle was chosen as the covergirl, even though Kong was the Knockouts champion. When Kong was ranked number-one in the "*PWI* Female 50" last year, she made the cover of the magazine … though she was placed in the background, behind The Beautiful People, Beth Phoenix, and Michelle McCool. Let's face it: Kong is a tremendous wrestler, but she's not the kind of pretty face that sells merchandise. Yes, it's a double standard, but it's a marketing reality. Just scan prime time TV and see how many women with Kong's body type you find. **GRADE: C+**

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: There's very little fancy about Kong's game. She overpowers people, bludgeons them with spinning backfists, and spikes them into the mat with an implant buster. It's very effective, though one-dimensional. When wrestlers like Kim and Wilde forced her to move laterally or knocked her off her feet, Kong was at a substantial disadvantage. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Kong's career peaked last year when she stormed onto the scene and set the TNA Knockouts division on fire. She's still in the same position as she was last year. If anything, the addition of manager Raisha Saeed has hurt her aura a bit—if she's so dangerous, why does she need an interfering manager? In fact, the focus in recent months seems to be slightly more on Saeed than it is on Kong. Even as champion, Kong's role in the Knockouts division has diminished slightly. She needs another Kim to challenge her and bring out the best in her. She seems to be coasting. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Few women have been able to put Kong's shoulders to the mat for the three-count, and she remains the gold standard of the Knockouts division. However, it seems like the rest of the women have realized they simply cannot beat Kong and are instead feuding with each other—Wilde, Roxxi, and The Governor are feuding with The Beautiful People, ODB is tied up with Cody Deaner. Kong is the champ, but she's on the outside looking in with the top storylines in the Knockouts division. That may be a very bad sign as far as her future with TNA is concerned. **GRADE: B+**

CHAMPION
WOMENS
TNA

1

2

AWESOME KONG

1 While the presence of Raisha Saeed has helped Kong in the past, fans have to wonder why she's still a necessity in Kong's corner. Is Saeed masking a deficiency on Kong's part?

2 The mighty Kong's strength is such that she can often handle two opponents in the ring without the help of Rhaka Kong and Saeed, who can stand and watch at ringside.

3 Kong doesn't feature a varied repertoire of wrestling maneuvers because, as Christy Hemme found out, her power-based moves are more than enough to keep foes under control.

4 At Kong's size, high-impact moves like this spinning back fist make her a serious threat to many male members of the TNA roster, including A.J. Styles.

5 Kong executes an implant buster on ODB, who is one of TNA's more robust Knockouts. Like so many other women in TNA's ranks, ODB fell easily to the Knockouts champion.

NIGEL McGUINNESS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Consider this: Since Nigel McGuinness won the ROH heavyweight title on October 6, 2007, the TNA World title has changed hands four times, the WWE heavyweight title has changed hands eight times, and the WWE World title has changed hands nine times (and that's prior to WrestleMania). Only Samoa Joe has held that championship longer, and Joe is widely considered to be the best champion in Ring of Honor history. During McGuinness' reign, ROH debuted on iNDEMAND PPV and HDNet TV, exposing the product to new audiences. McGuinness has been the face of the company during its first forays into the national market. He has accomplished a lot, but he still hasn't captured the fans' imaginations the way Joe did. Even if his title reign eclipses Joe's (and with his injuries problems, that seems unlikely), we suspect most fans would still rank him a notch below Joe on the all-time champions list. **GRADE: A**

MARKETABILITY: ROH fans never really warmed up to McGuinness the way they have other top stars. Maybe it's his condescending attitude, or even the fact that he's British (believe it or not, xenophobia among wrestling fans has been known to occur). Maybe the fact that he once refused to wrestle after suffering a concussion made people think he was "soft," or that he exploited those concussions to duck challengers and give him an edge. McGuinness has earned a grudging respect, but that respect hasn't translated into marketability, despite his clever T-shirts. Perhaps a more charismatic or dynamic champion could have helped ROH attract more viewers since becoming a PPV player. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: McGuinness hasn't always employed the most above-board tactics, but he was the longest-reigning Pure wrestling champion in the relatively brief history of that title, a championship created to reward mat wrestlers. He has held his own against Bryan Danielson, who was named best pound-for-pound wrestler in the world in the 2009 "*PWI* Poll." Plus, McGuinness typically enjoys a size advantage against most opponents, giving him a significant edge in power. He combines technical know-how with strength and rarely gets out-wrestled or out-muscled. **GRADE: A**

Photos by Joe Zanolle

CAREER GROWTH: It doesn't happen often, but McGuinness is a perfect example of a reigning champion becoming stale. A champion is relied upon to help a promotion grow. ROH has added new outlets, but its growth has been negligible. ROH has retained its fans but hasn't appreciably grown its fan base. As the company's champion, McGuinness bears some of the blame for that. He performs well enough to survive as champion, but not well enough to break new ground for the company. That's a dangerous place to be, both for McGuinness and for Ring of Honor. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: McGuinness has been an impressive champion. He will probably follow in the footsteps of Joe and C.M. Punk and go on to even greater success in a larger promotion. But, right now, McGuinness might actually be holding ROH back from bigger things. He has raised the bar even further, and a clean win over McGuinness is likely to springboard some contender into stardom. His greatest value is in his eventual passing of the torch for the good of the company. **GRADE: B+**

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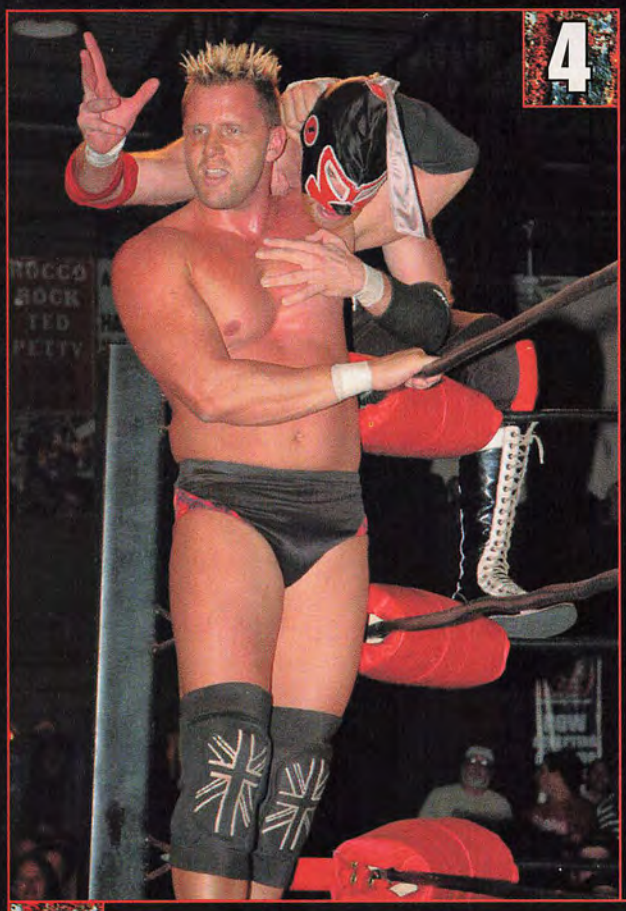

NIGEL McGUINNESS

1 McGuinness is a well-rounded wrestler that doesn't mind taking to the air or breaking the rules. His critics have used Nigel's tactics as a rallying point against him at times, but they can't argue with the results.

2 While not flashy, McGuinness' arsenal is as complete as they come. He can put opponents to sleep with strikes and other power-based moves or he can tie foes into knots with submission holds. This versatility has served him well in ROH, which features a wide array of wrestling styles.

3 The only downside to Nigel's game may be that he falls in love with certain maneuvers, such as his Jawbreaker Lariat. Overuse of this move can make him predictable, but, more importantly, it takes a toll on McGuinness each time he executes it. That's bad news for a wrestler suffering from two torn biceps.

4 After winning the ROH heavyweight title in 2007, few people could have predicted McGuinness would one day challenge Samoa Joe's record for length of title reign, but the Brit has proven his durability and lasting power.

5 Bryan Danielson is such an astute technician and master of the mat that Nigel's victory over him brought a measure of respect from grudging ROH fans. Despite arguments to the contrary, McGuinness career fight card is as impressive as most wrestlers'.

MELINA

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The woman with the dramatic entrance and Vegas showgirl-style managed to unseat the most dominant WWE Women's champion since Chyna. Her Royal Rumble win over Beth Phoenix not only earned Melina the women's title, but it marked a huge step for her credibility as a wrestler and not just another would-be model. However, Melina's win over Phoenix is still widely seen as a fluke, especially since Phoenix physically dominated her throughout that match and ensuing rematches. Melina still needs to score some decisive wins over Phoenix, Mickie James, and Natalya before she'll achieve recognition as a truly deserving champion. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: Melina is a unique competitor with a distinctive flair. Her ring style emphasizes agility and flexibility, which makes her matches and defensive moves (such as her *Matrix*-inspired backward duck) unique. The fact that she is of Mexican heritage and bilingual is also a big marketing plus, especially as WWE looks to make more inroads in the Hispanic community. However, the WWE Women's division is more watered-down than ever and Melina has yet to be featured in any real marquee feuds, other than against "The Glamazon." Her outspoken reluctance to posing for *Playboy* also slightly limits her potential marketability, though it does speak well for the conviction of her morals. **GRADE: B**

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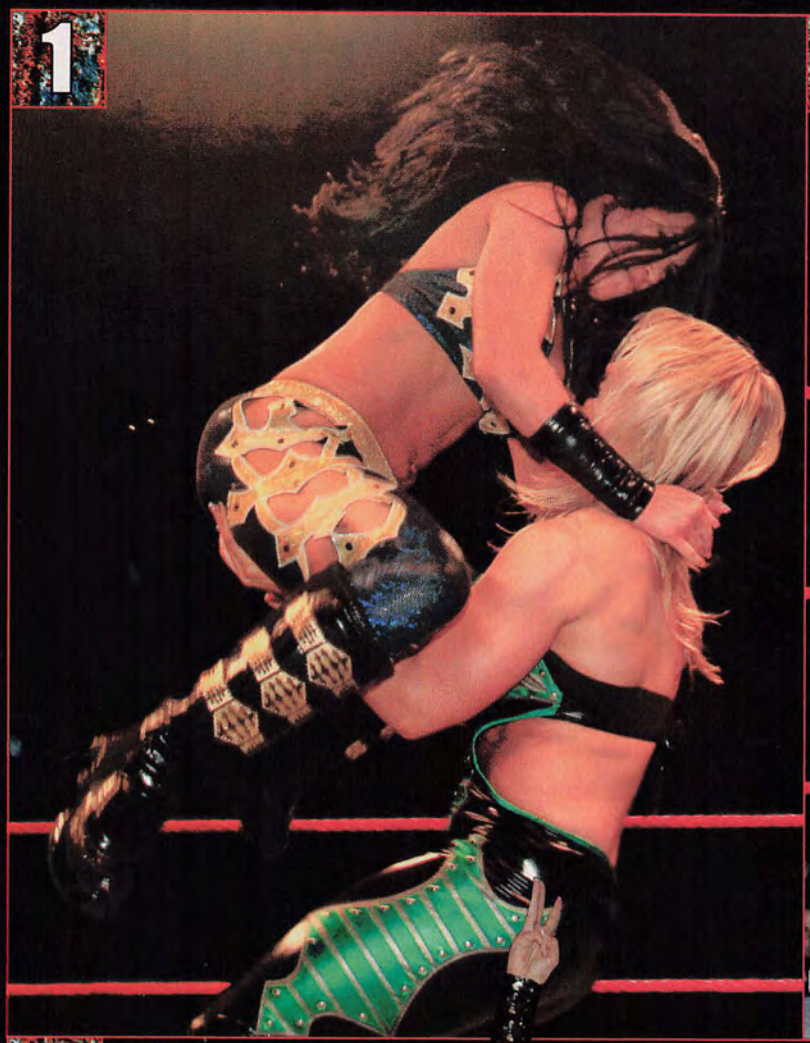
REPERTOIRE: Melina's new "L.A. Sunset" flip is very similar to Petey Williams' "Canadian Destroyer" piledriver, without the risk Williams' move entails. She has successfully used that move against the likes of Jillian Hall and other Divas, but has struggled with it against higher-level competitors. Lately, she has all but abandoned the move after seemingly losing faith in it, which is a shame. Without that big high-impact finisher, she relies too much on quickness and lacks both effective wear-down holds and knockout power. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: Melina entered WWE as the final M of M-N-M, serving as the valet for Joey Mercury and Johnny Nitro (Morrison). She is now a three-time women's champion. Melina has come a far way in a relatively short period of time. Now the challenge for her is to show staying power as champion. She needs to remind people that there is more to her than a split on the ring apron … as impressive as that split might be. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: The value of the women's division as a whole has suffered in recent years. Ever since Trish Stratus retired, the division has seemed somewhat stagnant, the result of Phoenix' dominance and the creation of the Divas title on the Smackdown brand. Melina is a unique, highly marketable Diva that can hold her own in the ring, which makes her a valuable part of the roster, but the relatively low prominence of the women's division drags her down. She needs to show more personality and make people notice her more. **GRADE: B+**

Photo by George Napolitano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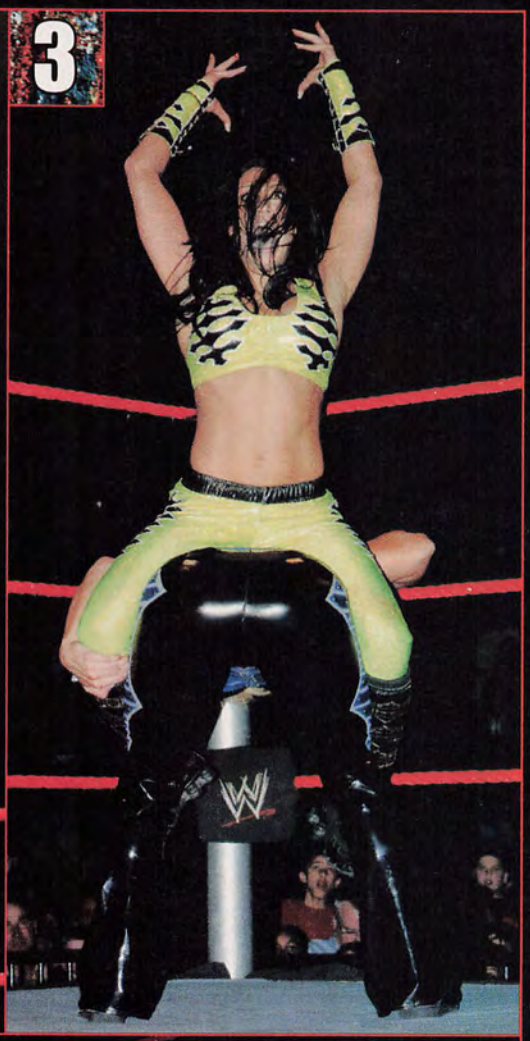
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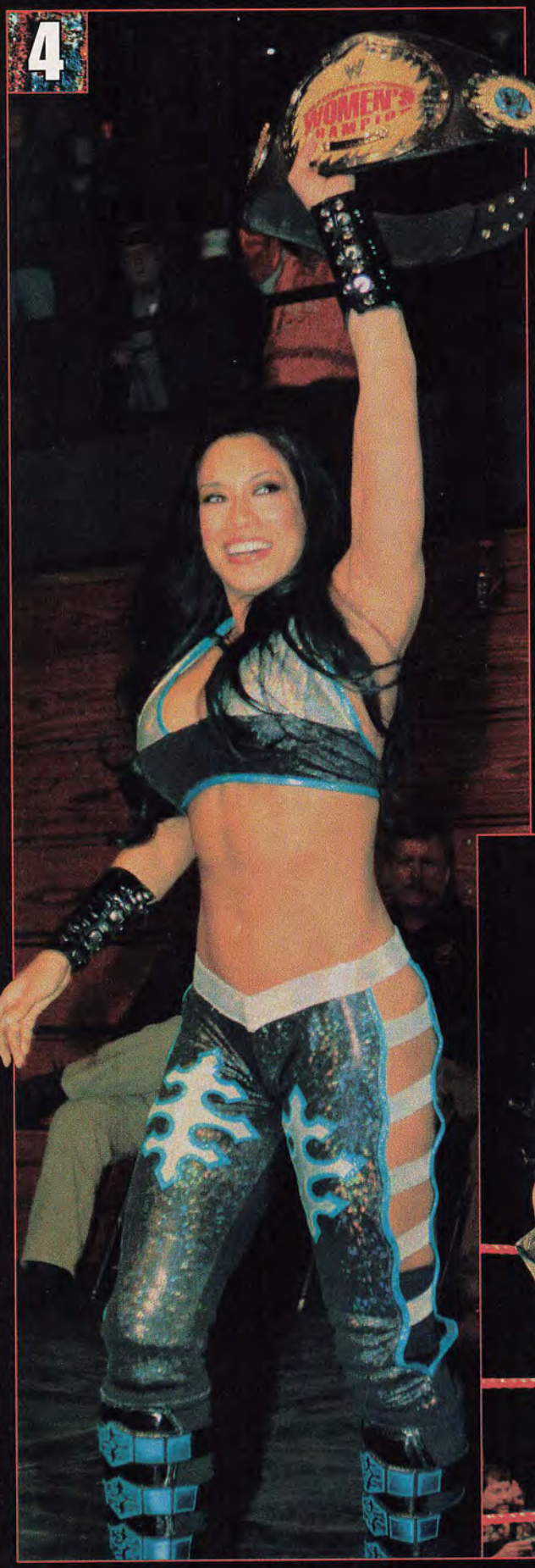
MELINA



1 Because she lacks the physical power to match a woman like Phoenix, Melina often relies on the element of surprise to compete against stronger women. Melina could stand to brush up on her knowledge of counters and chain wrestling.
Photo by Duane Long

2 Known for her splits on both sides of the ropes, Melina used her flexibility to conquer "The Glamazon" and win her third WWE women's championship.
Photo by George Napolitano

3 After returning from injury, Melina featured a high-risk flip as her finishing maneuver. The move worked effectively on softer competition, yet she all but abandoned it against Beth Phoenix. Melina must find a way to consistently use this finisher or she might find retaining the WWE women's title difficult.
Photo by George Napolitano

4 Although Melina makes a fine champ, her mettle is still in question. She simply needs more decisive victories over Divas from all three WWE brands before she can be considered on par with her arch-rival Phoenix.
Photo by George Napolitano

5 Melina is popular in her own right and doesn't need the rub from Divas such as Mickie James. As a Latina, Melina is marketable but must still find ways to get her name and image across more forcefully in the mainstream.
Photo by Matt Roberts

C.M. PUNK

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: He cashed in his "Money In The Bank" title shot and embarked on a whirlwind Cinderella ride as the WWE World champion. It was a dream come true for C.M. Punk … but even the best dreams have to end eventually. Punk's title run came to an inglorious conclusion at Unforgiven when Randy Orton, Cody Rhodes, and Ted DiBiase Jr. jumped him, allowing Chris Jericho to take his place in the championship scramble match (a match Jericho would win). Since then, he has won—and lost—both the WWE World tag team title and Intercontinental title. No wrestler had ever won the WWE "Triple Crown" in one year … and few have strung together three shorter reigns than Punk did. **GRADE: A-**

Photo by George Napolitano

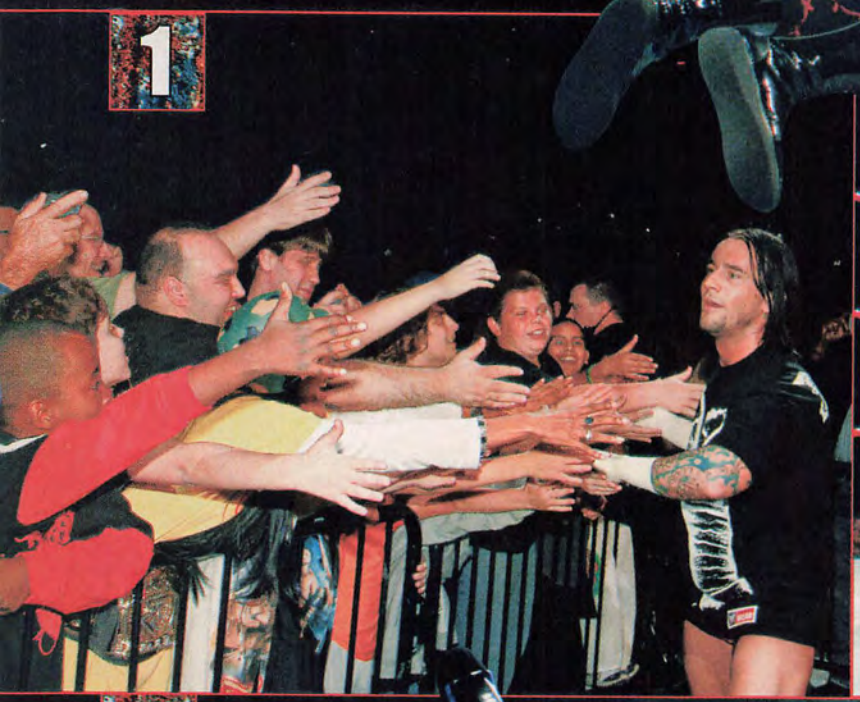
MARKETABILITY: Like Jeff Hardy, Punk has a vocal, diehard fan base. Unlike Hardy (whose sole foray into ROH was infamously booed), Punk has indy credibility. Punk was selling loads of merchandise and DVDs before he ever got to WWE. Today, with the WWE marketing monolith embracing his straight-edge lifestyle, Punk is a merchandising empire unto himself. His sole setback in the marketing department is that he doesn't have the Hollywood action star look that wrestlers like John Cena, Triple-H, and Batista boast. **GRADE: A-**

REPERTOIRE: Punk's Go To Sleep finisher is effective, but unwieldy. He struggles to hoist larger opponents into position for the move. He has completely stopped using his anaconda vice submission hold, which worked so well for him during his ECW days. When it comes to repertoire, Punk is streaky. He seems to concentrate on a few moves at a time and forgets the standards that helped get him where he is today. The ROH (and ECW) Punk was a better all-around wrestler than the Raw Punk. He has the skills, but doesn't always seem to know when to use them most effectively. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Six months ago, Punk was at the top of the mountain. Today, he's barely cracking the top-10 contender's list on Raw. It's not like he was injured or went on some crazy MVP-like losing streak. He just dropped his title and did very little to get it back. At times, Punk seems content to be competing in WWE and taking home a paycheck. If he doesn't get some fire back in his belly, there's a very real chance that last year's unforgettable World title win will be the only one of his career. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Honestly, we don't think Punk has scratched the surface of his potential. At his core, Punk is one of the most intense wrestlers in the sport today. He is well versed in kickboxing and Muay Thai, has a tremendous amount of experience, and is a student of puroresu. He has an army of fans willing to support him through all weather. The only thing is … Punk just doesn't seem at home in WWE. He lacks the old spark he had in ROH. Punk Lite is much less valuable than the C.M. Punk that lies beneath the surface. It's time for that Punk to come back out. **GRADE: B+**

Photo by Matt Roberts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C.M. PUNK

1 Punk's popularity among the fans makes him quite marketable. His straight-edge lifestyle and up-tempo wrestling style help make Punk's merchandise a hot commodity at the concession stands.
Photo by Duane Long

2 Although Punk will throw a jarring dropkick now and then, he's much less reliant on the high-risk maneuvers that made him a legend in the independent ranks.
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3 Last year, Punk collected quite a bit of WWE gold. Kane was a frequent foe of Punk's, as the two locked horns in ECW and on Raw.
Photo by Matt Roberts

4 Strikes and kicks are a key element of Punk's repertoire and reflect his mastery of Muay Thai and kickboxing. But he'll need to mesh this martial arts component into his overall game more seamlessly if he hopes to recapture championship gold.
Photo by Shane M. Kidder

5 During this year's grading period, Punk waged quite a war with William Regal over the Intercontinental title. Punk successfully turned Regal away, but eventually dropped the strap to John Bradshaw Layfield.
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STING

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: When Kurt Angle formed the Main Event Mafia, the last thing he could have expected would have been Sting leapfrogging him and taking the TNA World title. While we can't quite understand why Sting chooses to remain aligned with Angle, Kevin Nash, and the rest of the MEM, we have to give him credit for beating Samoa Joe at Bound for Glory and successfully turning back challenger after challenger. Joe, Angle, A.J. Styles, and Team 3-D have all fallen to the WCW legend. Sting has exceeded the loftiest of expectations. **GRADE: A**

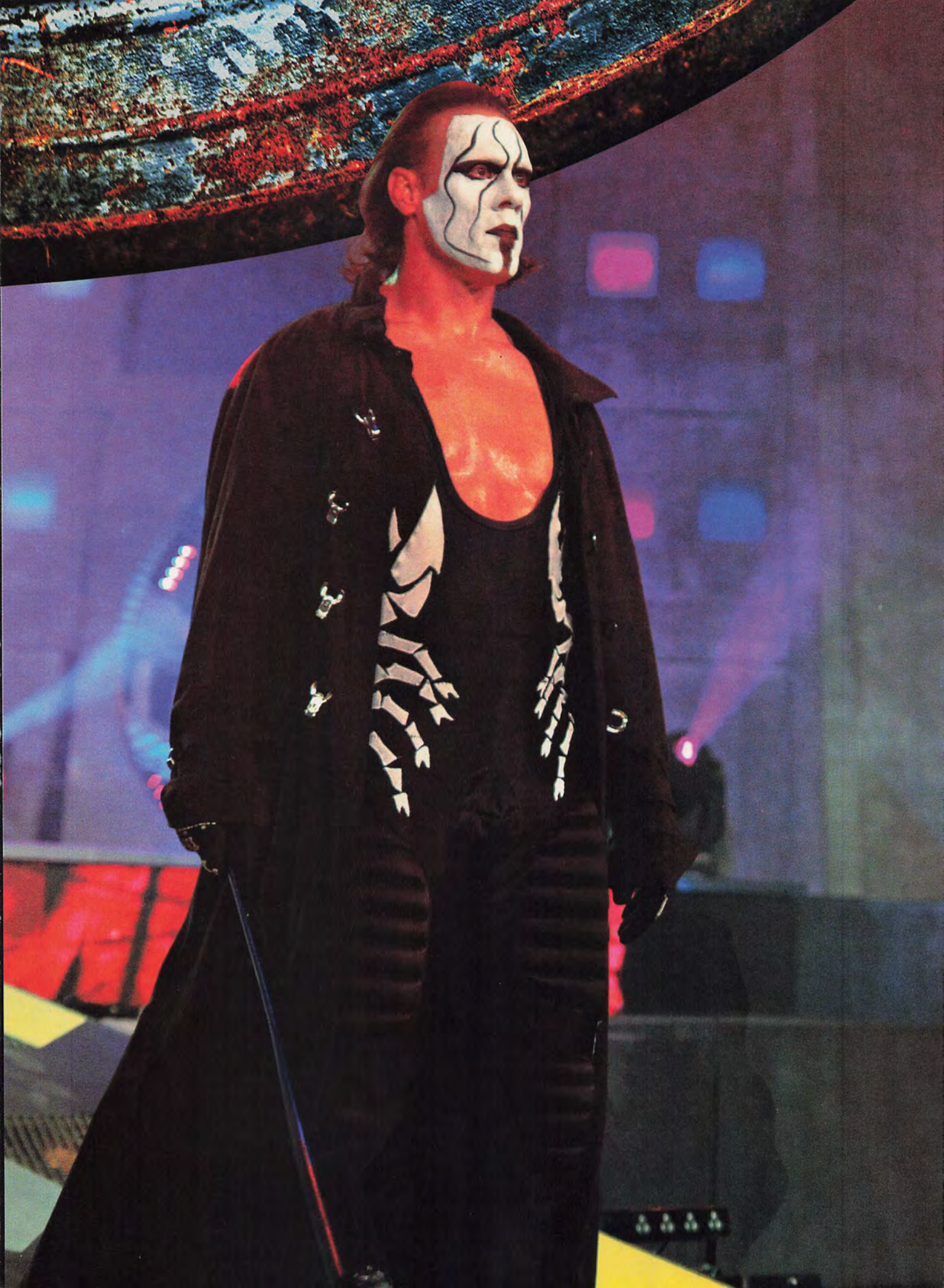
Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

MARKETABILITY: Sting is still one of the most recognizable stars in the game. His dalliance with the Main Event Mafia hurt his popularity somewhat, but Sting has managed to remain true to his own moral compass, which has at least earned the respect of the fans. Sting's likeness has been plastered on just about every type of merchandise that you can imagine through the years, and he remains just as viable a star today as he was two decades ago. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Age takes its toll on the best of us. Sting has slowed noticeably over the past three years. There was a stretch of time when Sting opted to compete while wearing a T-shirt; we have to suspect he was attempting to cover up a little bit of a middle-age paunch. He's still an impressive physical specimen, but he isn't the cardiovascular machine he once was. To compensate, Sting has adopted a more methodical approach and paces himself through his matches. He excels when he can control the pace of the bout, but struggles badly when forced to aggressively counter-wrestle on the mat. His stamina is lacking and his physical strength has dropped a notch, but he's a wily veteran and he knows how to make adjustments. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: He may no longer be in the prime of his career, but Sting is still one of the top wrestlers in the sport today. In recent years, he has talked frankly about retirement. Life after wrestling is clearly on his mind, and so is his legacy. Sting may complain about the attitude of the younger wrestlers on the TNA roster, but we suspect that's because he's trying to push them to break through to the next level, the same way Ric Flair pushed him at the first Clash of the Champions. Sting's looking to give back to the sport, but he's also adding new chapters to his own legacy with every successful defense of his title. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Sting still has marquee value. He's still a man that can draw the fans who simply stopped watching wrestling when WCW closed its doors. He can still compete at a main event level (though perhaps not for much longer). He just needs to take a more active role as a mentor to the rising stars of TNA. While facing Mick Foley might draw immediate buys, matches against Alex Shelley, Matt Morgan, and Samoa Joe can do much more good for TNA in the long run. **GRADE: B+**



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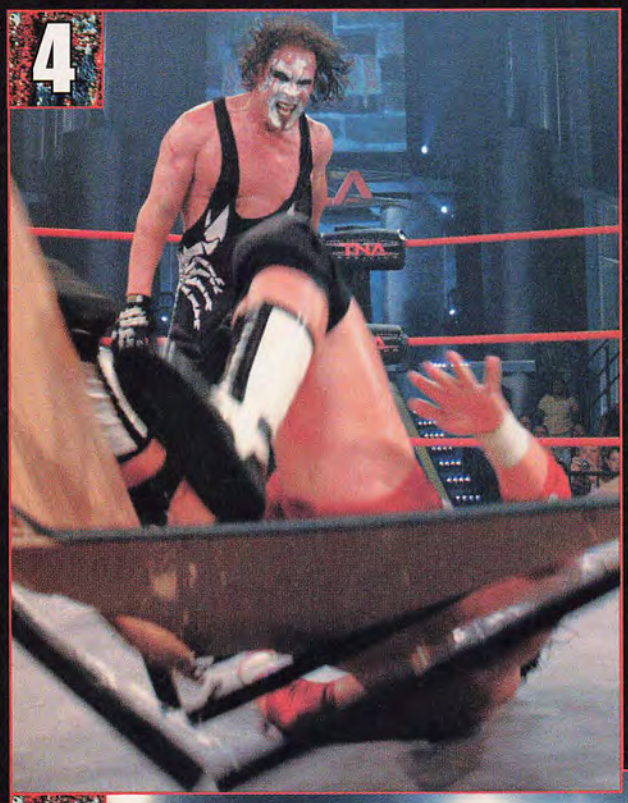


STING

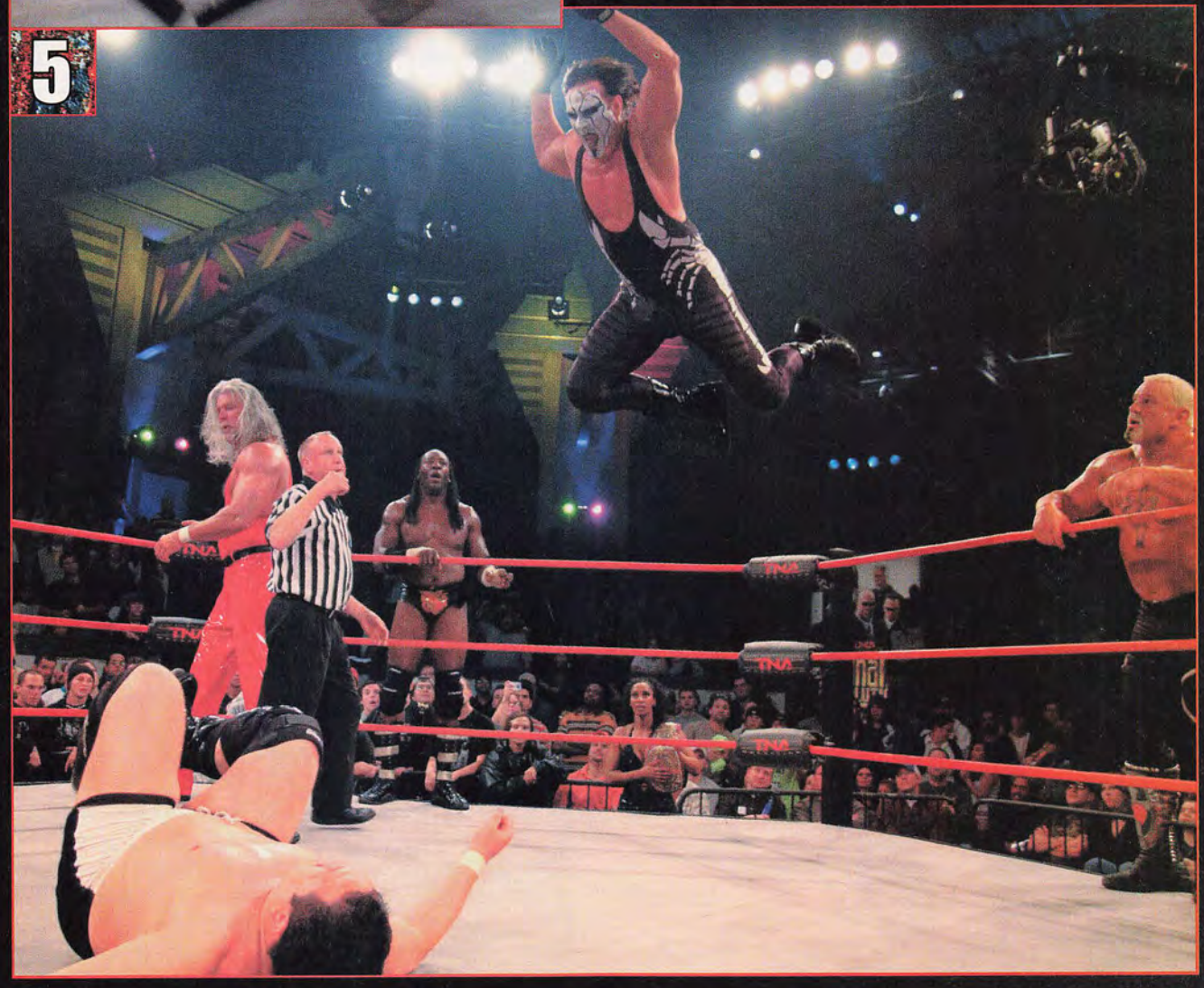
1 Despite getting up in age, Sting is a key player for TNA. At Bound For Glory he took home his third TNA World title. "The Icon" continued to prove why he is one of the most dangerous players out there.

2 Sting's decision to join the Main Event Mafia stunned many fans. However, few were surprised that he butted heads with stablemate Kurt Angle, whose desire to win Sting's World title superceded team unity.

3 Although the adjustments in his game have not been dramatic, Sting has added nuances that allow him to keep pace with TNA's most technically sound wrestlers and its most fearsome brawlers.

4 After more than 20 years in the sport, Sting has learned to pace himself in the ring. Still, even TNA's finest don't want to deal with the intensity that lurks behind that face paint.

5 Any wrestler that underestimates Sting's ability due to his age is in for a rude awakening. No doubt, age has taken a toll on him, but the "Stinger" can still dial up the energy needed to defend his title.



A.J. STYLES

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Ever since his contentious split with Kurt Angle, A.J. Styles has revived a career that started with such boundless potential. No longer is the "Phenomenal One" willing to play second fiddle to an older star, and his feud with the Main Event Mafia has the potential to launch his career to the next level if he and the rest of the Frontline succeed against Angle and his allies. He's already become the first TNA Grand Slam champion by virtue of defeating Booker T for the new Legends championship. At 30, Styles is just beginning to reach his prime in the ring. As long as he stays healthy, there's no reason why he can't continue to rack up title belts in TNA. **GRADE: B+**

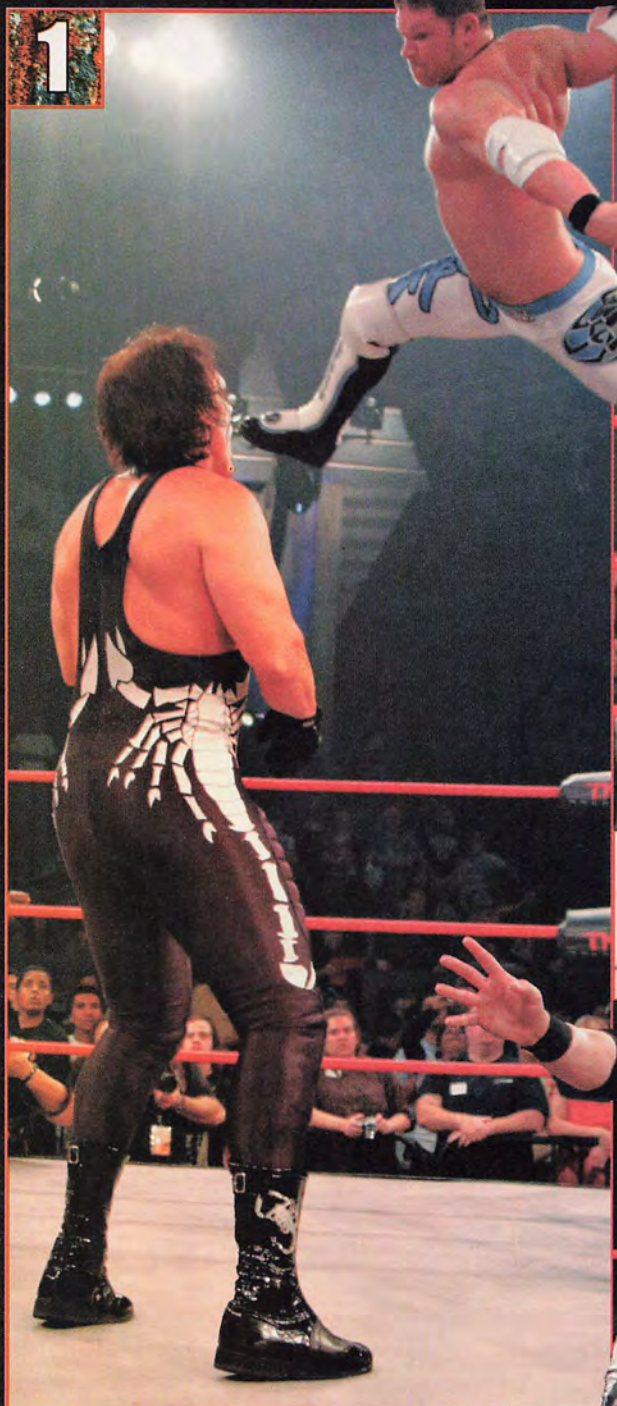
Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

MARKETABILITY: When his behavior is true to himself, Styles presents himself like an old-fashioned, clean-cut fan favorite. He has worked hard to improve his delivery on promos, and while he'll never be one of wrestling's great orators, he does get his point across. In another era, he would have been a huge regional star throughout the South based on his appearance and personal values as well as his undeniable talent. But in a national—and now international—promotion such as TNA, it's taken time for Styles to blossom as a marketable figure. There's still work to be done in that area. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: Styles has a tremendous arsenal of ground-based as well as aerial moves. He also has an amateur background, having attended Anderson College on a wrestling scholarship. While he often gives away size to opponents, he is in tremendous physical condition and can wear down larger foes. Most important, Styles of late has been expanding his repertoire of moves to set up his frog splash. He's back on top of his game and giving some of the best wrestlers of the last two decades all they can handle in the ring. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: When Styles was wasting his time and energy fighting Kurt Angle's battles and being used as a pawn by Angle's ex-wife, Karen, he found his once-promising career stagnating. But ever since he's broken loose from Angle and refocused on his own career, he's made use of some of the tricks of the trade he picked up from the cunning former Olympic gold medalist. Styles is now more dangerous than ever, as the Main Event Mafia has learned. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: Styles has the opportunity to launch his career into the same stratosphere Sting reached when he feuded with Ric Flair and The Four Horsemen in the NWA. Sting grabbed the top fan favorite torch from an aging Dusty Rhodes and became a legend. Styles, who is arguably more naturally talented (although not as naturally charismatic) as Sting, has the potential to take a similar jump. **GRADE: B+**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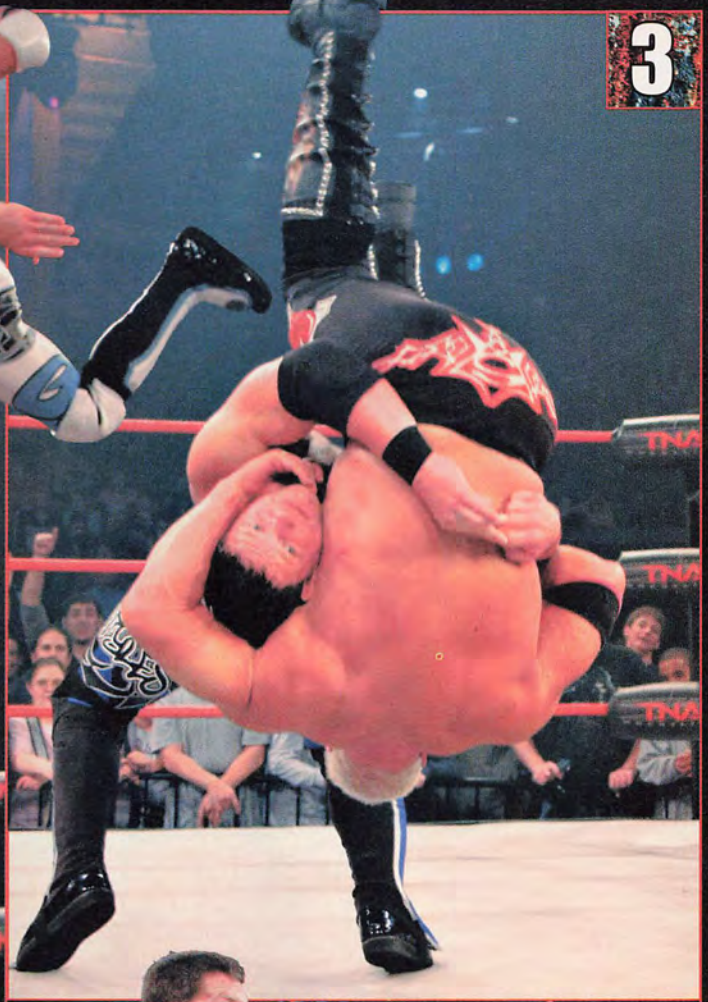
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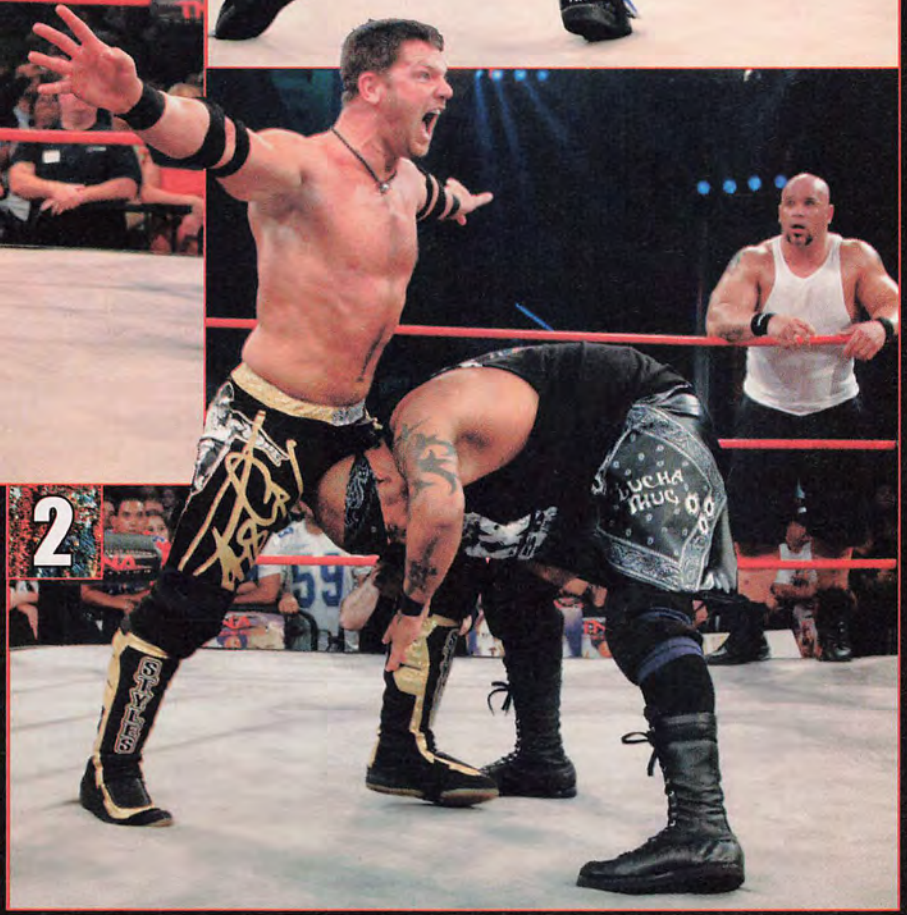
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A.J. STYLES

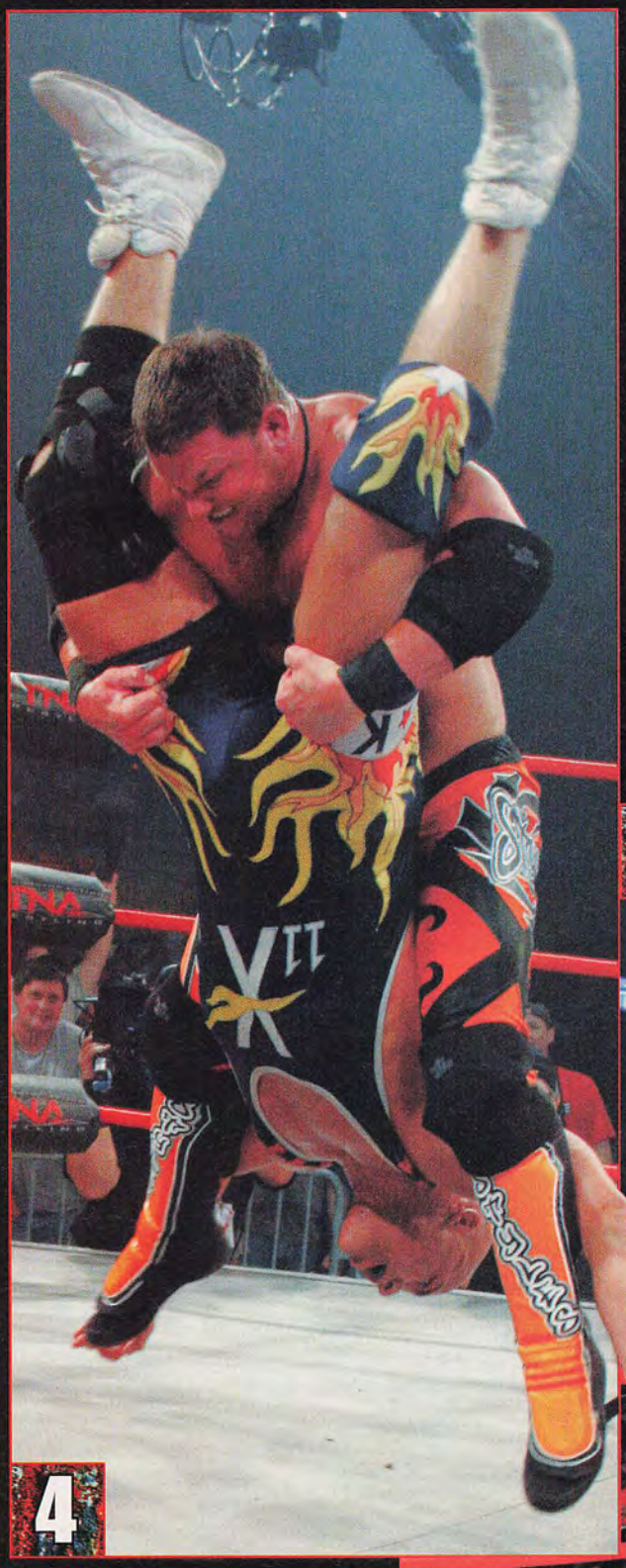
1 Despite battling against each other, Sting and Styles' career paths share several similarities. Styles seems ready to step up and assume the mantle of TNA's top star, just as Sting did in the NWA nearly two decades ago.

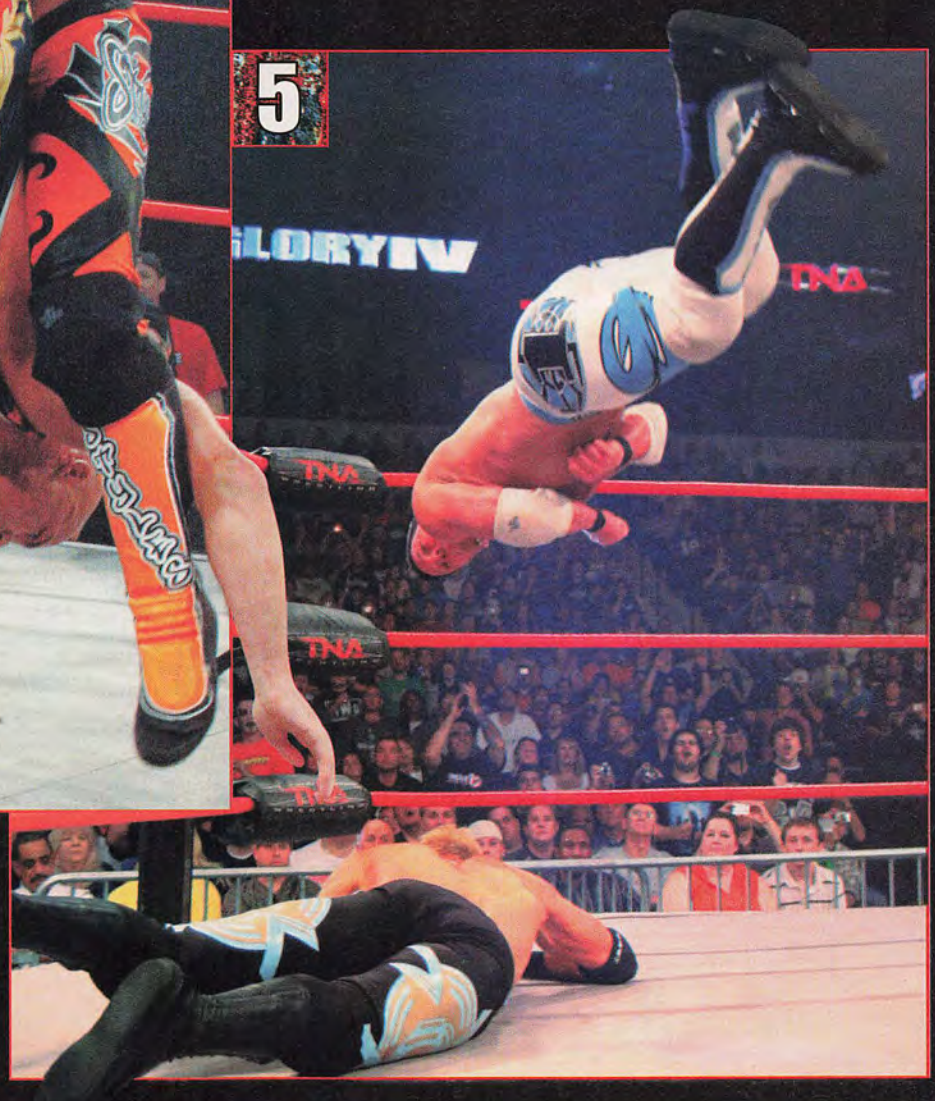
2 Now that Styles has distanced himself from Kurt and Karen Angle, his intensity has returned tenfold. A.J. needs that emotion to fuel him in the ring no matter whom he's taking on.

3 Styles' aerial ability was never in question, but the "Phenomenal One" has raised the level of his mat wrestling to a higher level as well. The overall depth of A.J.'s game makes him a threat to any TNA titleholder.

4 Perhaps the time Styles spent as Kurt Angle's lackey wasn't all bad. Who knows how many effective trade secrets A.J. picked up from the Olympic medalist over the months?

5 The only tool A.J. may be lacking at this time is the gift of gab, although his promos are getting better all the time. Still, if Styles hopes to increase his marketability, he's better off letting his breathtaking move set speak for itself.





JACK SWAGGER

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: A year ago, Jake Hager was one of the most promising prospects in the WWE developmental system. Since joining the ECW brand, the newly christened Jack Swagger has had nothing but success. He cleanly defeated Matt Hardy for the ECW title and even had the audacity to call out the ECW icon, Tommy Dreamer, and cleanly beat the "Innovator Of Violence." In less than a year's time, Swagger has already achieved just about everything he can with the ECW brand. He has become a medium-sized fish in a small pond. It's about time for him to test himself against more diverse competition on Raw or Smackdown. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: We can't understand what possessed the WWE Creative team to give Hager such a hokey name. Really ... Jack Swagger? What's next? Johnny Strut? Billy Arrogant? Not since Justin Credible has an ECW champion been burdened by such a cornball name (and that includes Rhyno). Besides his unwieldy name, Swagger is best known for his toothy grin, and a slight lisp when he speaks. He doesn't have the look or charisma to make him stand out from the pack—fortunately, he has his wrestling ability to help him on that front. He needs to show more personality, or at least come up with some decent catchphrases. Otherwise, he's completely vanilla. **GRADE: C**

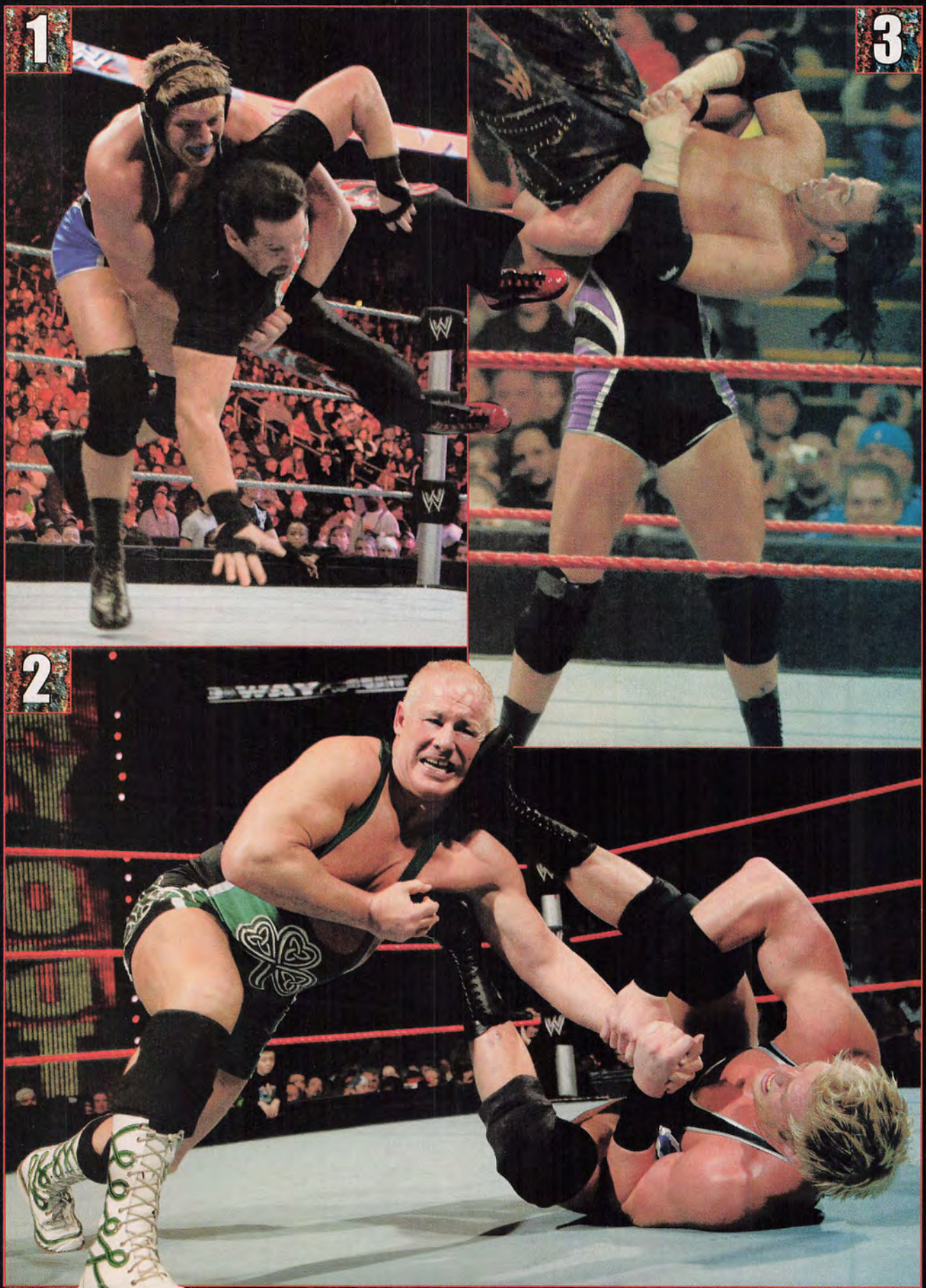
Photo by George Napolitano

REPERTOIRE: Some people have compared Swagger to a young Kurt Angle. We're not ready to go that far quite yet, but we have been impressed with what we've seen thus far. The "All-American American" has some good takedowns, deceptive speed, and formidable counter-wrestling abilities. His gut-wrench power bomb is simple but effective; it torques the abdominal muscles, causes opponents to lose their breath, and then slams them viciously on their upper back and shoulders. We haven't seen him on the defensive enough to really get a good feel for how effective that segment of his game is. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Swagger couldn't have planned his progress any better if he tried. After an impressive showing in Florida Championship Wrestling, he moved to the WWE brand that most values pure wrestling and has been the most inviting to young new talent. He collected win after win, then won the ECW title during the January 13, 2009, edition of ECW on Sci Fi. He's on the road to very big things; it's crucial that he avoids a costly misstep. **GRADE: A**

OVERALL VALUE: Swagger is positioned to be one of the young lions of WWE and could be a big star in the near future. But the road to the top is littered with "can't miss" prospects that fell by the wayside. For every Randy Orton who blazes through developmental and becomes a star, there are a half-dozen Kenny Dykstras who fall short because they were unable to connect with the fans. From a pure wrestling standpoint, Swagger is ready to take the next step, but without developing more of a personality—more swagger, if you will—his overall value currently is less than it could be. **GRADE: B+**

Photo by Matt Roberts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JACK SWAGGER

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Swagger's impressive amateur wrestling background helped his transition from FCW to WWE. However, Swagger still has some elements of his game to improve before he shuffles off to Raw or Smackdown.

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2

Swagger's instincts and sense of balance have helped him turn away the challenges of more experienced foes such as Finlay in ECW. Few wrestlers possess such traits at such an early stage of their development.

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3

If power is something you can't teach, then Swagger is way ahead of the curve. His gut-wrench power bomb is one of the most devastating moves in the game today. Swagger uses it to decimate foes on the mat in a variety of ways.

Photo by George Napolitano

4

Whether it's his lisp or simply being asked to do more, Swagger hasn't displayed much comfort on the microphone. This might be Swagger's only glaring weakness, but it's a critical one, as Raw and Smackdown superstars are expected to bring their A game on the mat and on the mike.

Photo by Matt Roberts

5

While it is still early in Swagger's career, one promising sign is the champion's willingness to take on all comers. By standing up to Finlay, Dreamer, Matt Hardy, and Christian, Swagger has shown that he's ready to battle the best of the best in ECW.

Photo by Matt Roberts

THE UNDERTAKER

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: After this much time in the game, we can't help but wonder what goals The Undertaker has left. He has won his world championships and set a WrestleMania win streak that is all-but-guaranteed never to be broken. He is a first ballot Hall-of-Famer in anyone's book. After achieving all of that, one would think the "Dead Man" has one eye set on retirement, yet he keeps battling on. 'Taker's still main-event talent and a perennial title contender, but lately he seems to lack motivation. If he has any goals left, we can't figure out what they are. **GRADE: B**

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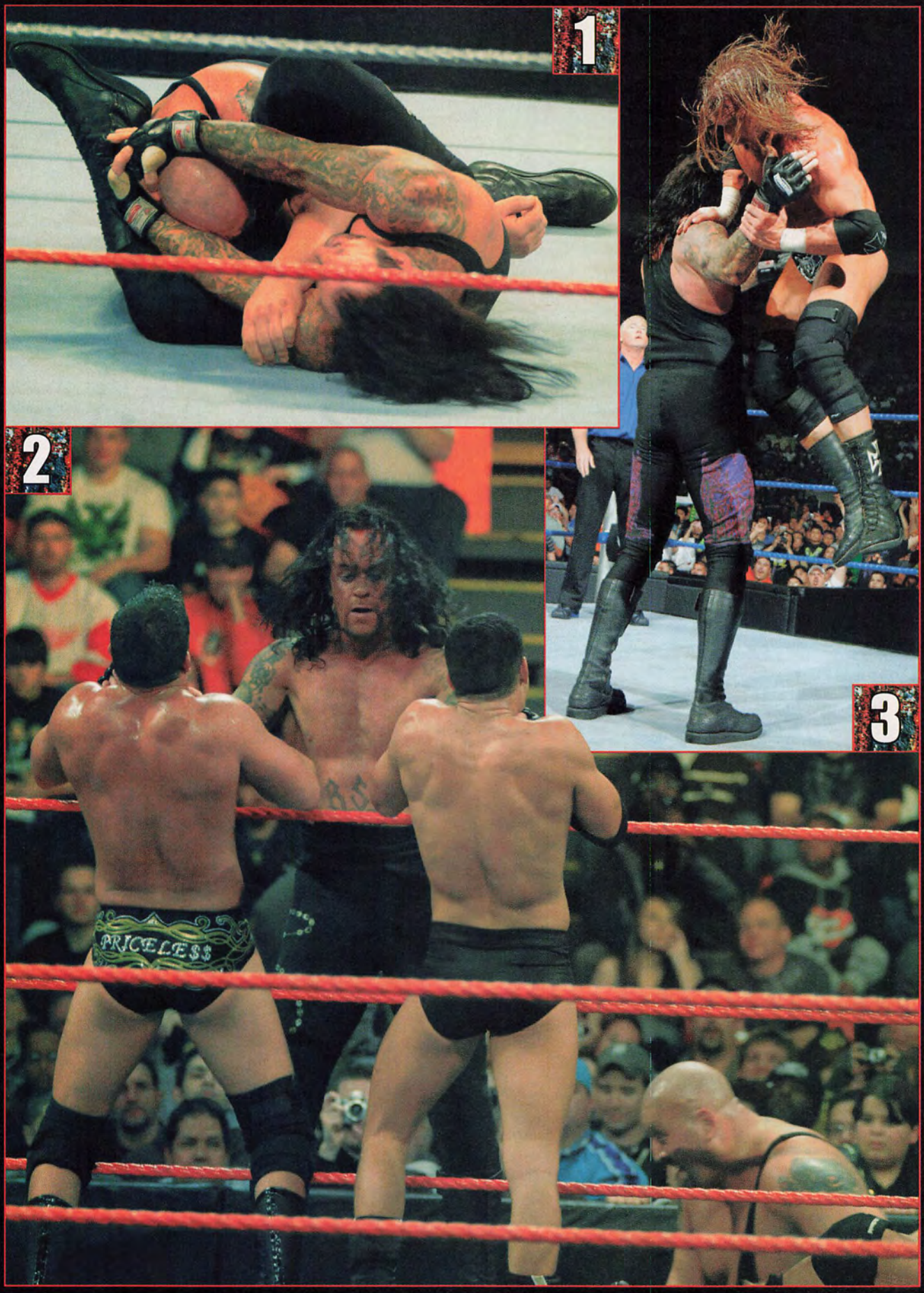
MARKETABILITY: Not many people could have taken a gimmick of a walking dead man and turned it into a multi-million-dollar commodity with a shelf life of nearly 20 years. Undertaker deserves credit for keeping his persona fresh through his various incarnations and for taking frequent sabbaticals to prevent overexposure. As a result, 'Taker may be even more popular—and marketable—today than any other point in his career. **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: A couple of years ago, Undertaker incorporated a new dimension to his game by adding some MMA moves (including the "Hell's Gate" chokehold) and strikes to his arsenal. These moves have helped extend his career as they take less of a physical toll on his body, while still damaging opponents. But time does march on. Undertaker has slowed considerably over the past few years. His lateral movement has deteriorated, and his punches lack the power they used to. He also seems slower in fending off takedowns and attacks to his legs. It's about time for him to either add more grappling to his game, or go back to being a pure power wrestler. Lately, it's not uncommon to see UT get outwrestled and overpowered; there was a time when neither of those things ever happened. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Undertaker is a legend whose interest in world titles waxes and wanes. When he's inspired and in the hunt for a championship, he's an absolute predator, but when he's not chasing gold, he grows complacent. Facing Shawn Michaels at 'Mania may have given him a marquee match, but there's little long-term benefit. Yes, he's a phenom, but he was a phenom five, 10, even 15 years ago, too. That's hardly growth. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: Undertaker has become the modern-day Andre the Giant. 'Taker is larger-than-life, he's an attraction. It doesn't really matter whether he's a champion or not. People will buy tickets to see the "Dead Man" in action. WWE has very few competitors like that on its roster these days. Undertaker transcends the sport and sells impressive amounts of merchandise. However, after another year of the same thing, even his biggest supporters have to wonder if 'Taker might be more valuable with a lesser role. It might be time for him to stand aside and give some younger competitors a chance to shine, or to mount a serious challenge for a world title. There should be no more middle ground. **GRADE: B+**

Photo by George Napolitano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THE UNDERTAKER

4

1 By adding some MMA-inspired holds and strikes (such as this gogoplata) into his arsenal, 'Taker has remained competitive against much younger opponents, such as The Big Show. He can make foes submit from seemingly out of nowhere.
Photo by George Napolitano

2 Wrestlers not only have to compete against a 6'10" athlete when facing The Undertaker, they must also battle his mystique. It's often been said that many of UT's opponents are beaten before the bell even rings.
Photo by George Napolitano

3 Even after all these years, Undertaker remains a difficult challenge for current powerhouses such as Triple-H. Through a routine of rest and adaptation, Taker has remained relevant in WWE.
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4 While Taker's ropewalk might be cool to watch, fans have to wonder just how effective the move still is. Despite his best efforts, time had dulled the edge on some of 'Taker's power-based moves.
Photo by George Napolitano

5 Why do fans still spend good money to watch The Undertaker wrestle? Because there's always something compelling about his matches—including his specialty, the casket match. The mystery surrounding the "Dead Man's" character has always captivated fans.
Photo by George Napolitano

5

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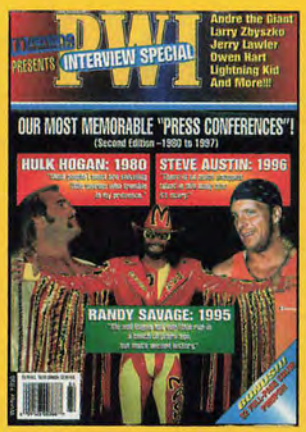

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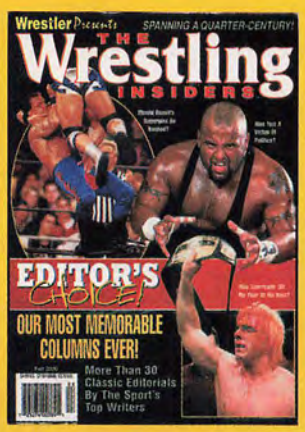
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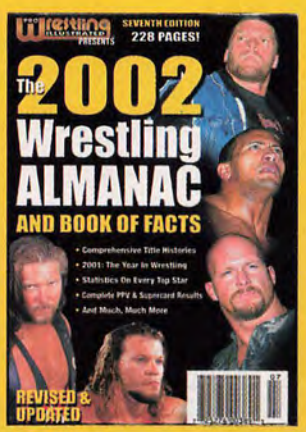
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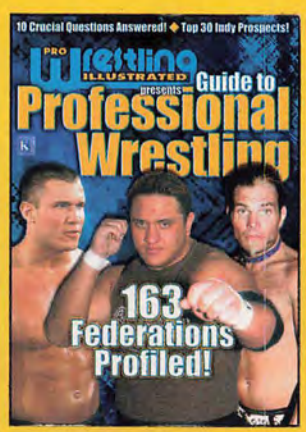
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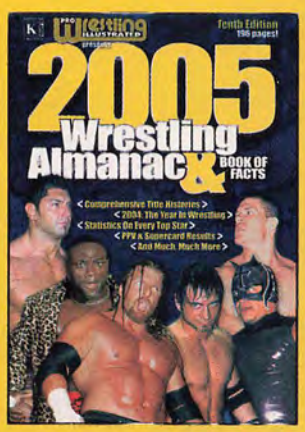

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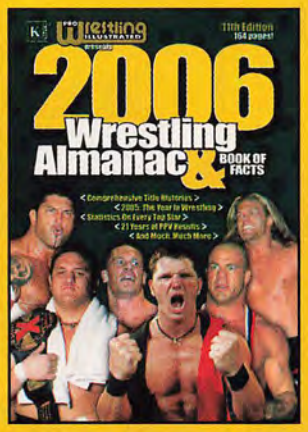

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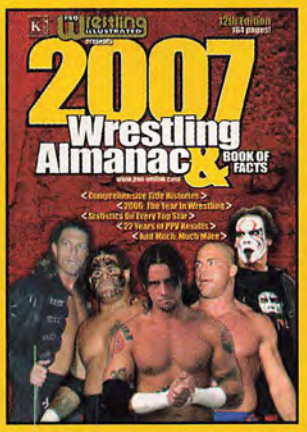

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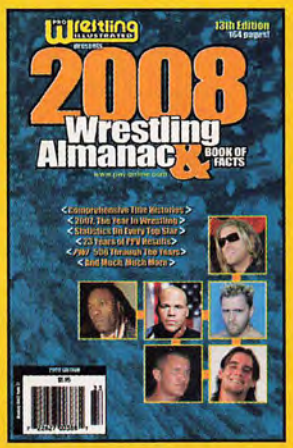

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STING'S CAREER

A Year-By-Year Report Card

COMPILED BY **HARRY BURKETT**

WHILE WE ARE confident there will be more in the future, the sport currently has very few active wrestlers worthy of the term "icon." In the late-1990s, Hulk Hogan, Roddy Piper, and Randy Savage popularized the term, used to describe legendary performers who were still on the active roster. With Ric Flair's retirement last year, who's left? Shawn Michaels. The Undertaker. Maybe Triple-H.

One definite, however, is Sting.

The living legend was TNA World champion when he turned 50 on March 20. His star-power outshines that of Kurt Angle, Kevin Nash, and Mick Foley. He's an icon that's still cool. He's an icon that can still go. He's an icon that doesn't need the WWE hype machine—and never did.

In this special section, we evaluate Sting's career year by year, assigning a grade to each. We agree that Sting has enjoyed a grade-A career overall, but there were a few low points, particularly during his formative months, the dying days of WCW, and the aimless years of the early-2000s.

Yet those are only a few valleys amid a career of very high peaks. Two NWA title reigns, six WCW title reigns, and two TNA title reigns: Sting is a 10-time world champion. He has feuded with Flair, Hogan, and Angle, three of the biggest stars of the past 25 years. He is a role model to millions.

Each of our 24 yearly analyses details the evolution of Sting. Collectively, they create a portrait of the man, the wrestler, and the icon. Amid the rising tide of "Hulkamania," Sting was one of many bodybuilders to become pro wrestlers. He was one of the very few to realize that learning the mat game was more important than his fantastic physique. He represented the future of wrestling in the late-1980s.

Responsibility was thrust upon Sting in the early-1990s when he was considered the only potential savior of a directionless WCW. Frankly, his charisma and skill set had not reached maturity yet. But, just when Hulk Hogan and an endless series of new arrivals from the WWF threatened to smother Sting's star-power, he stumbled upon a gimmick that would place him higher—both literally and figuratively—than anyone in WCW at the height of the Monday Night War.

After a few years of semiretirement, Sting has been thriving in the third phase of his career. His modesty and integrity have made Sting an exemplary role model in TNA's locker room. And the best part is that he has performed at a physical level never before seen from a wrestler in his late-40s.

As Sting approaches the twilight of his career, he has nearly completed his evolution. Sting was a very one-dimensional wrestler and personality when he gained national prominence in 1986—a cardboard imitation of Ivan Drago from *Rocky IV*. Sting's many matches against Ric Flair over a 13-year period helped him develop into a technically sound wrestler with fantastic endurance. In fact, Sting's in-ring skills have often been underrated simply because he spent so much time being compared to Flair.

Nearly a quarter-century after his debut, Sting is truly multidimensional with unparalleled character depth. Often compared to former Powerteam USA stablemate The Ultimate Warrior in the past, Sting is now most comparable to The Undertaker. Like 'Taker, Sting has emerged as a steady and reliable icon whose legend will endure forever.

We hope you enjoy this in-depth look at the career of the man called Sting.

STING

1985

Steve Borden resisted pro wrestling at first, content with pursuing a bodybuilding career. He turned heads while training at Gold's Gym in Venice Beach, California, and even tried out for the Mr. USA competition in 1984. The legendary Red Bastien discovered Borden, and, after considerable coaxing, persuaded him to give wrestling a try.

Borden trained under Bastien in 1985. Meanwhile, Rick Bassman—now famous as the founder of California's Ultimate Pro Wrestling—was trying to form a quartet of bodybuilders on the West Coast. He had already recruited Garland Donoho, Mark Miller, and Jim Hellwig (later known as The Ultimate Warrior). Still searching for the elusive prototype for the fourth spot, Bassman convinced a reluctant Borden to join the group.

A revolutionary concept, Powerteam USA showcased bodybuilders-turned-wrestlers long before it was en vogue. Hulk Hogan had just won the WWF World title. The Road Warriors and Nikita Koloff had only begun to gain national reputations. Rick Rude and Scott Hall were still unknowns.

Borden had only 10 weeks of actual training before he joined Powerteam USA on the California independent circuit in November 1985. Donoho and Miller dropped out quickly, but Steve "Flash" Borden and Jim "Justice" Hellwig hung in there. At the risk of being tagged as wrestling's version of The Superfriends, Borden and Hellwig maintained their heroic personas, but adopted a new team name—The Freedom Fighters—when they entered the Memphis-based Continental Wrestling Association in December. Borden (still known as Flash) and Hellwig (now known as Rock) steamrolled Jerry Bryant and Lou Winston in less than three minutes in their CWA debut in Jonesboro, Arkansas. That month, they went on to defeat all their opponents in three minutes or less.

Powerteam USA: Jim Hellwig, Steve Borden, Garland Donoho, and Mark Miller

Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler hoped they had stumbled upon their version of The Road Warriors. Yet Flash and Rock were no Hawk and Animal … at least not yet.

At the dawn of his career, Sting was green and clumsy, and, quite frankly, thought he was above the business. He soon learned otherwise. In fact, he gained a newfound respect for his new profession within a few short weeks.

GRADE: C-

1986

While in the Mid-Southern area, Flash and Rock dumped the "Freedom Fighters" moniker in favor of an edgier team name: The Blade Runners. Just as Hawk and Animal had stolen the "Road Warrior" name from a post-apocalyptic science fiction movie set in the future, Flash and Rock took the Blade Runner name from a 1982 science fiction movie set in the year 2019.

Indeed, the youngsters portrayed themselves as machine-like humans—almost cyborgs—that incorporated the latest technology into their training regimens. "We have developed a series of analysis programs into which we feed data regarding our food intake, our sleep habits, our physical dimensions, our weight-training regimen, and so forth," stated Flash in an "Introducing" feature published in the May 1986 issue of *The Wrestler*. "The computer crunches the numbers, and, in turn, makes recommendations regarding modifications of our training habits."

Uh-huh. Flash and Rock could be ruthless, too, injuring Phil Hickerson's arm with the timekeeper's bell during a match against Hickerson and his partner, Koko Ware.

The Blade Runners then moved to the Universal Wrestling Federation in the Mid-South area. Borden changed his name to "Sting" as he and Rock continued their dominance. Rock split the scene, however, jumping to Texas-based World Class Championship Wrestling.

Sting joined Eddie Gilbert and Missy Hyatt's Hot Stuff & Hyatt International, where he became Gilbert's protégé. He benefited greatly from his tag team matches with the second-generation star. Sting and Gilbert won the UWF tag team title on two occasions during their feud with The Fantastics.

The impressionable rulebreaker rarely spoke, serving more as the muscle to back up Gilbert's mouth. He was like an apprentice to the evil sorcerer, whose ring intellect is still considered among the greatest of all-time. Unlike 1985, when Borden was almost a wrestler against his will, 1986 was the year that Sting became a true student of the game.

PWI Awards: Rookie of the Year (second runner-up)

GRADE: C+

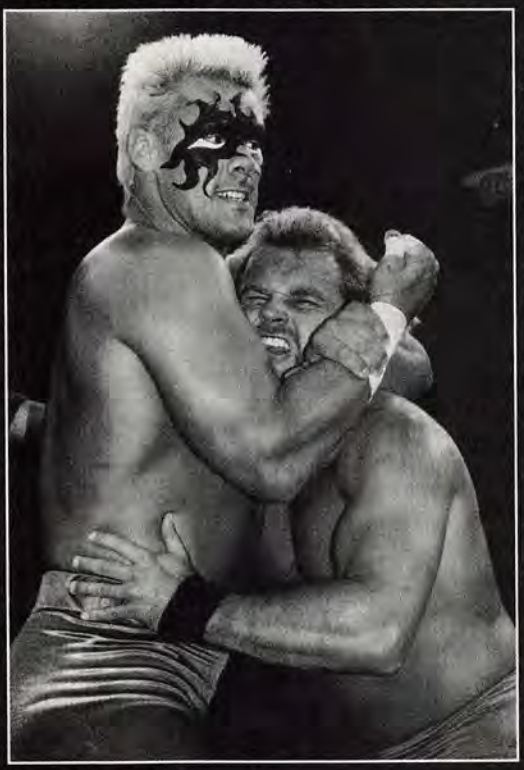
1987

Sting's career continued to flourish as a member of Hotstuff & Hyatt International, as he and stablemate Rick Steiner defeated Chris Adams and Terry Taylor for the UWF tag team title in Atlanta. Their reign lasted only one month, however, because Eddie Gilbert's interference cost Sting and Steiner the belts in a match against Brad Armstrong and Tim Horner, otherwise known as The Lightning Express. This severely strained Sting's relationship with Gilbert.

The issue came to a head when Gilbert's interference backfired again and caused Sting to lose a high-profile match to Taylor. Sting and Gilbert began arguing, and Gilbert and Taylor responded by beating down Sting. Adams rescued Sting, who went on to help him in his feud with Gilbert and Taylor. Sting heard cheers for the first time since his formative months in California.

Sting pursued Gilbert's UWF TV title for a number of months, but came up short. He did gain a measure of revenge, however, by helping an up-and-coming Shane Douglas upset "Hot Stuff" for the championship.

Interestingly, Sting was one of the few UWF wrestlers to benefit from Jim Crockett Jr.'s purchase of Bill Watts' UWF in late-1987. Like Gilbert, JCP booker Dusty Rhodes recognized Sting's potential as a main-eventer. Thanks to Rhodes, Sting would go from being a midcard attraction in the UWF to being a top-tier headliner in the NWA.



Sting vs. Eddie Gilbert

Sting was introduced to NWA fans at Starrcade 1987, when he teamed with Michael Hayes and Jim Garvin to battle Gilbert, Steiner, and Larry Zbyszko to a time-limit draw in the opening bout. His singles feud with Gilbert continued into early-1987.

In only his sophomore year, Sting was on a clear path to superstardom. His willingness to work with others impressed bookers Gilbert and Rhodes, just as it would later impress Ric Flair. Sting had the talent and charisma to carry the mantle of main-eventer—and he was trustworthy enough to be given a try.

PWI Awards: Most Improved (third runner-up)

GRADE: B

1988

Although Sting is often touted as the only contemporary main-eventer to have never worked for Vince McMahon, he can credit WrestleMania IV for launching him into superstar status. That's because WrestleMania IV was scheduled for March 27, 1988, and NWA promoter Jim Crockett Jr. retaliated with the first-ever Clash of Champions on the same date. In fact, the Clash went on the air on WTBS precisely at the same time WrestleMania IV began transmitting on the national pay-per-view feed.

No one can refute the glitz and glamour associated with that particular WrestleMania emanating from Trump Plaza in Atlantic City, but there's little doubt that the Clash's main event of NWA World champion Ric Flair vs. Sting is more remembered—and was a better match—than the WrestleMania IV main event, a WWF World title tournament final pitting Randy Savage vs. Ted DiBiase.

Flair vs. Sting was a 45-minute marathon on free TV and drew a Nielsen rating of 5.6. As the bell signaled the time-limit draw, Sting had the champion snared in a Scorpion Deathlock and pleading for mercy. Flair held on to the title … but a new star was born.

Sting failed to win the NWA World title despite many rematches against Flair at non-televised house shows over the next several months. The seeming inevitability of Sting capturing Flair's title faded, however, as he also failed in his attempts to win gold from U.S. champion Barry Windham and TV champion Mike Rotundo.

Yet he remained Jim Crockett Promotions' most popular star. He gave Nikita Koloff the rub when he joined forces with the former Communist to battle World tag team champions Arn Anderson and Tully Blanchard to a 20-minute draw at The Great American Bash. Critics suggested that even booker Dusty Rhodes wanted some of Sting's spotlight, as he teamed with "The Stinger" to face The Road Warriors for the World tag team belts at Starrcade '88.

As 1988 drew to a close, Sting was a rising star that seemed capable of winning the World title someday, but would most likely have a run with one of the NWA's secondary belts before he captured the big prize. Rhodes had perfectly positioned Sting for the next phase of his career.

PWI Awards: Most Improved; Match of the Year (vs. Ric Flair, first runner-up); Most Popular (second runner-up)

GRADE: A

1989

Sting kicked off the year in strong fashion, battling NWA World champion Ric Flair to a one-hour draw on New Year's Day. Ten months after his tremendous 45-minute draw with Flair at the original Clash of Champions, "The Stinger" was obviously being groomed for the 15 pounds of gold. But there was a snag: Rhodes was fired as booker in March of 1989. Would that adversely affect Sting's push?

Not a bit. The executives in the now-Turner-owned World Championship Wrestling were eager for younger, more exciting stars to take the lead in the company. If anything, the ouster of Rhodes ensured that Sting's rise would continue at an even faster pace.

Soon after Rhodes' departure, Sting beat Mike Rotundo for the NWA TV title, his first singles championship. Sting defended the title mostly against lower midcard wrestlers. The rare exception was former WWF World champion The Iron Sheik, who had entered WCW for a very brief period, and was past his prime. It seemed the powers-that-be wanted fans to become accustomed to the idea of Sting as a champion. Indeed, Sting was a role model with a fighting spirit, and he never exploited the shorter time limits associated with the TV championship to hold on to the strap.

Sting's first real test as TV champion came on July 23 at The Great American Bash. The little-known Great Muta, who had previously wrestled in the U.S. as The White Ninja and The Super Ninja, nearly overwhelmed Sting at that pay-per-view event. Although Sting appeared to score the three-count, a tape replay revealed that Muta had lifted his shoulder at the count of two. The NWA would later declare the title vacant.

Perhaps just as consequential was the outcome of Ric Flair's NWA World title defense against Terry Funk on the same PPV. Flair won the match, but soon fell victim to a two-on-one attack from Funk and Muta. Sting came to the rescue of his fiercest rival, which led to a series of tag team matches pitting Sting and Flair against Muta and Funk through October.

This led to Sting's unlikely membership in the next incarnation of The Four Horsemen, which also included Flair and the Andersons. His relationship with his fellow Horsemen became strained, however, when Sting beat Flair, Muta, and Lex Luger in a round-robin Iron Man tournament, thereby winning a shot at Flair's title in the future. Sting had proven he was the best wrestler in WCW.

PWI Awards: Most Popular (second runner-up)

GRADE: A

1990

As far as Sting was concerned, the path to the NWA World title was paved with gold. Yet inexplicably, the ever-gullible Sting was the only one surprised when Ole Anderson gave him an ultimatum at Clash of the Champions X: Surrender the title shot against Flair or incur the wrath of the Horsemen.

Sting refused to give up the shot, and the rest is history. Flair and the Andersons fired Sting from the Horsemen and administered a brutal beatdown. As it turned out, Sting had to postpone the match when he sustained a ruptured patella tendon in his knee. Lex Luger replaced Sting in the title bout against Flair at Wrestle War '90. During that match, Luger sacrificed his own title shot when he rescued Sting from a Horsemen attack at ringside.

It got even worse. The Horsemen attacked Sting again in Washington, D.C., at WCW's Capitol Combat pay-per-view. This time, he was rescued by Robocop. Enough said.

Sting's real-life injury served as the perfect buildup to his star-spangled NWA World title victory over Flair on July 7 at The Great American Bash. To Sting, it was the achievement of a lifetime. To WCW executives, it was the beginning of a new era.

To Flair, Sting's reign was just another belt swap.

That doesn't mean Sting's six-month title reign was not impressive. He beat Flair in several rematches and ended his feud with Sid Vicious by defeating him convincingly at Halloween Havoc. It was about this time that a masked man named The Black Scorpion began stalking Sting. Although it wasn't known to fans at the time, a number of different wrestlers portrayed The Black Scorpion, including Ole Anderson, Alex Perez, Jeff Ellis, "Wild" Bill Irwin, The Angel of Death, and Barry Windham.

But everyone knew it was Ric Flair when he donned the hood to wrestle Sting at that year's Starrcade. Was it Flair's protruding nose? The tufts of blond hair sticking out of the mask? Or the Scorpion's insistence on wrestling just like the "Nature Boy"? It's impossible to say for sure, but the entire fiasco dampened Starrcade '90, the event that should have validated Sting as NWA World champion.

Despite his World title reign, Sting was saddled with Robocop, The Black Scorpion, and, yes, his brief membership in The Dudes With Attitudes. It should've been an A+ year for "The Stinger," but it wasn't.

PWI Awards: Wrestler of the Year; Most Inspirational; Match of the Year (vs. Ric Flair, first runner-up); Most Popular (first runner-up)

GRADE: A-

Sting with NWA World title belt

1991

Take two. Sting had been a carefully handled franchise until he won the NWA World title from Ric Flair in Baltimore. Then it was as if Sting's World title reign could function on autopilot without anyone navigating a clear course. With Sting as the superhero champion, Turner executives could finally turn WCW into what they wanted all along: an imitation of the WWF.

It was a flop. Sure, the WWF had been a mainstream phenomenon. But yesterday's WCW fans are today's NASCAR fans—and they didn't like the cartoonish changes in their Southern-based promotion, a ridiculous era that Sting came to represent. Arena attendance had dropped dramatically without Flair as champion.

WCW bookers had to rebuild their franchise: Sting.

They had to rewind past 1990 as if it never happened—back to 1989, before the worst booking imaginable had soiled Sting's reputation. He needed a few great matches, another run with a secondary championship, and another World title chase. And then maybe, just maybe, a second crack at the gold would work.

The bookers didn't waste any time. Flair regained the World title from Sting on January 11 at the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, New Jersey. Sting was able to save face because his foot was clearly on the ropes during the pinfall.

Fortunately, Sting had a great match the following month at the first SuperBrawl pay-per-view. In fact, it wasn't just great—it was *PWI*'s Match of the Year. Sting and Lex Luger faced WCW World tag team champs The Steiner Brothers in a rare battle between fan favorites in the PPV's main event. Sting and Luger won the match by disqualification when Nikita Koloff, aiming for arch-rival Luger, nailed Sting with a chain.

Sting and Lex Luger vs. The Steiner Brothers

That led to a feud between Sting and Koloff that culminated at The Great American Bash, where Sting suffered a surprising loss to Koloff in a Russian chain match. The outcome re-established Sting's vulnerability and made him a sympathetic figure.

Sting got back on the winning track by defeating the up-and-coming Steve Austin in a tournament final to capture his first-ever U.S. heavyweight title. He held the title until mid-November, when former friend—and new WCW World champion—Lex Luger injured his leg, causing him to lose the belt to Rick Rude.

The rebuilding of Sting was showing signs of working. Unfortunately, the Turner-owned WCW was in a very weakened state, compared to the heyday of Jim Crockett Promotions.

PWI Awards: Match of the Year (with Lex Luger vs. The Steiner Brothers); Most Popular; Feud of the Year (vs. Cactus Jack and Abdullah the Butcher, second runner-up), Wrestler of the Year (third runner-up)

GRADE: B+

1992

As the New Year dawned, Sting faced an new world: WCW without Ric Flair. The "Nature Boy" defected to the WWF midway through 1991, leaving Sting as the undisputed top star.

Sting defeated Luger to win his first-ever WCW World championship at SuperBrawl, then dealt with a steady stream of challengers from The Dangerous Alliance. He captained "Sting's Squadron" against The Dangerous Alliance in a violent "War Games" encounter in May. Sting, Rick Steamboat, Nikita Koloff, Dustin Rhodes, and Barry Windham soundly defeated Paul E. Dangerously's team of Rick Rude, Arn Anderson, Larry Zbyszko, Steve Austin, and Bobby Eaton to humiliate the Alliance.

Even more impressive, Sting was injured going into the match. The 450-pound Big Van Vader had splashed Sting the previous month at Atlanta's Omni, rupturing his spleen and cracking three of his ribs. Eventually, Sting defended the WCW World title against Vader at The Great American Bash. It turned out to be two Bash losses in a row when he missed a Stinger splash and hit his head on the ringpost. Vader easily dropped the incapacitated Sting with a power bomb to win the WCW belt.

Yet that loss didn't diminish Sting's importance to the company. He went on to have a thrilling falls-count-anywhere match against Cactus Jack at Bash at the Beach. But this was WCW, and there was bound to be a misstep. That occurred at Halloween Havoc when he agreed to a "Spin The Wheel, Make The Deal" match with Jake Roberts. Neither man had any idea what the specialty match of choice would be at Havoc ... until Sting spun the un-gimmicked wheel and made the really bad deal: a coal miner's glove match.

The match stunk up the place. This wasn't Jerry Lawler vs. Bill Dundee in Memphis, circa 1982. This was WCW during a nationally televised pay-per-view, and Sting and Roberts' clumsy execution of the match is now infamous.

By year's end, Sting had once again established his "Franchise" status as being more important than the WCW World title, as he defeated then-champion Vader in the final of a King of Cable tournament held at Starrcade.

Sting proved to be a locker room leader and capable of carrying a company. Unfortunately, the company was WCW.

PWI Awards: Most Popular

GRADE: A

1993

The Sting-Vader feud dominated WCW for the first half of 1993, with Vader rebounding from his non-title loss to Sting at Starrcade and beating "The Stinger" in a bloody strap match at SuperBrawl. Sting defeated Vader for the WCW World title on March 11 in London, England, and then lost it back on March 17 in Dublin, Ireland.

That six-day World title reign probably did more to hurt Sting's career than to help it. As long as Sting chased the title and Vader foiled him by dastardly means, fans would've remained interested in the Sting-Vader rivalry. But the fact that Sting finally achieved his goal, only to drop the belt back to Vader in less than a week, served to take him out of the World title picture, at least temporarily.

For the first time, the WCW powers-that-be didn't seem so sure that Sting was the future of the company. A part of the future? Yes. The next Ric Flair? Probably not.

First, WCW signed former WWF Intercontinental champion Davey Boy Smith. He and Sting defeated Vader and Sid Vicious at Beach Blast. Smith washed out rather quickly, leading bookers to orchestrate a falling-out between Vader and Vicious. Turner executives who knew nothing about wrestling were in awe of Sid's physique and thought he had the stuff to be the next Hulk Hogan. Yet Sid became embroiled in a highly publicized brawl with Arn Anderson in a British hotel room and was subsequently released, and the decision was made to pit Ric Flair—fresh from two World title reigns in the WWF—against WCW World champ Vader at Starrcade '93.

Sting and Davey Boy Smith

And how did bookers build up Flair's credibility prior to his showdown against Vicious? By having him beat Sting, of course. It was a terrific 40-minute match that gave Flair the intended boost, but it set Sting's career back five years. Sting had gone from the young sensation that nearly upset Flair in 1988 and beat him for the World title in 1990 to losing to the 44-year-old Flair in 1993. WCW bookers went on to pair Sting with Flair for a series of matches to solidify the "Nature Boy's" new status as a fan favorite.

Davey Boy, Sid, and a return to Flair. Sometime between 1992 and 1993, the decision was made that Sting was not the man to lead WCW as its World champion.

But the biggest threat to Sting's star power was just around the corner—and he was clad in red and yellow.

PWI Awards: Most Popular (first runner-up)

GRADE: B

1994

Sting won a few token victories in 1994, including a European Cup tournament during another overseas tour and a win over Big Van Vader for the WCW International title, formerly recognized as the NWA World championship.

The disturbing pattern that began in 1993 continued in 1994, with Sting winning matches whenever it did not come at the risk of stealing the spotlight from WCW's other top stars. The European Cup tournament? That barely caused a blip on WCW's Saturday morning show. The WCW International title? Yes, that was WCW's second "world" title defended primarily overseas. Whose idea was it to send Sting out of the country to defend a dead championship?

We still don't know, but it was obviously someone who didn't have the interests of Sting—or that of WCW—at heart.

Sting's International title reign didn't last long anyway, as he lost a title-unification bout against World champion Ric Flair at Clash of the Champions XXVII. This was WCW's way of retiring a championship that symbolized nothing while at the same time completing Flair's heel turn that year.

There were cosmetic considerations, too. New WCW Vice President Eric Bischoff was already preparing the way for the incoming Hulk Hogan. With the International and World titles merged, the big gold belt that formerly represented the NWA World title and the International title would then symbolize the WCW World championship. And "The Hulkster" would look a lot better with the heralded 15 pounds of gold around his waist.

Of course, Hogan steamrolled into WCW, trounced Flair for the World title in his very first match, and Sting kissed his World title aspirations goodbye. Like many WCW mainstays, Sting tried to make the best of the situation by rationalizing that the influx of former WWF talent would make more money for everyone.

Fans saw something else. Sting was the first man to pat Flair on the back after he won the World title from Vader, and he was the first man to shake Hogan's hand after he arrived in WCW via ticker-tape parade. In fact, Sting spent the second half of the year teaming with new champ Hogan against Kevin Sullivan's Dungeon of Doom.

Was Sting becoming a dupe?

PWI Awards: Most Popular

GRADE: B-

1995

Although Sting probably had the nickname trademarked at this point, he was no longer the "Franchise" of WCW. There was no doubt that WCW was rebuilding its entire company around the *real* franchise, World champion Hulk Hogan.

It wasn't so bad for Sting, though. Like Hogan, Sting loved the idea of parlaying his wrestling success into a career in Hollywood. He had already guest-starred in Hogan's TNT action-adventure series, *Thunder In Paradise,* and was actively vying for other acting roles. Sting no doubt believed Hogan could be an invaluable connection to the entertainment industry.

His main rival during the first half of 1995 was Big Bubba Rogers, formerly known as Big Bossman. He teamed with Randy Savage to defeat Rogers and Avalanche (John Tenta) at SuperBrawl, and lost to Rogers by pinfall at Uncensored. Sting ended the feud by defeating him convincingly at Slamboree, forcing the Cobb County native into submission with the Scorpion Deathlock.

Just as it seemed that Sting might get bogged down in one senseless feud after another, he won a tournament for the U.S. heavyweight title, defeating Meng in the final. Sting continued to be Hogan's right-hand man, teaming with "The Hulkster," Lex Luger, and Randy Savage to defeat Meng, Zodiac (Brutus Beefcake), The Shark (yet another incarnation of John Tenta), and Kamala in a "War Games" match at Fall Brawl. Meanwhile, Sting enjoyed a successful six-month reign as U.S. champ until he lost the belt to Kensuke Sasaki in Tokyo, Japan, of all places.

Sting fell into a comfortable groove as Hogan's running buddy. Maybe he could be content with being WCW's number-two star. It would be like Bruno Sammartino and Chief Jay Strongbow, Nick Bockwinkel and Billy Robinson, Hulk Hogan and Tito Santana.

Then Sting made the mistake of befriending Ric Flair yet again. He saved Flair from an attack by Arn Anderson and Brian Pillman, only to have Flair turn on him at Halloween Havoc and re-form The Four Horsemen with Anderson, Pillman, and Chris Benoit. Fortunately, Sting defeated Flair at World War III, WCW's November pay-per-view, effectively ending this rather stale chapter of the Sting-Flair saga in its infancy.

Whew. That was a close one.

PWI Awards: Most Popular (first runner-up); Wrestler of the Year (second runner-up)

GRADE: B+

1996

Why is Sting so gullible? WCW fans were asking that question at the start of 1996 when Sting began teaming with Lex Luger. Friends warned Sting that Luger was bad news. Sting should have known this better than anyone because Luger had double-crossed Sting back in 1991. Yet the out-of-the-ring friendship between Sting and Luger ran deep, as the two even owned a fitness center together.

"The Stinger" proved his loyalty to Luger by forming a tag team with him, but it was apparent these two stars were not on the same page. On the way to the ring, Sting continued slapping hands and kissing babies. But Luger preferred back-handing to glad-handing, and shunned the fans with a sneer. Yet when Sting would look back at his partner, Luger would suddenly start slapping hands.

Hadn't fans already seen this scenario? Good ol' Charlie Brown would go to kick the football, and Lucy would pull it away one more time. Except this time around, Luger didn't snatch the football. Sting's trust paid off (for once), and he and Luger went on to defeat Harlem Heat for the World tag team title and successfully defend the belts against The Road Warriors on several occasions. Sting and a rehabilitated Luger held on to the straps until losing to Harlem Heat five months later.

Then came the day that would change wrestling history. Sting and Luger teamed with Randy Savage to face new arrivals Scott Hall and Kevin Nash and a mystery partner at Bash at the Beach. Luger was escorted from the ring due to an injury in the early going and The Outsiders' mystery partner was nowhere to be seen. Hall and Nash's vicious tactics had Sting and Savage in trouble, and it appeared that Hulk Hogan was running in for the rescue. Instead, Hogan legdropped Savage for the victory, revealing himself to be the mystery partner.

Sting and Lex Luger

The New World Order was born.

Sting and Luger made a valiant—but losing—effort against Hall and Nash the following month at Hog Wild. Then the NWO began openly courting Sting and claimed he would be their partner for "War Games" at Fall Brawl. In reality, the NWO recruited wrestler Jeff Farmer to masquerade as Sting for that match, and WCW loyalists called Sting a traitor.

Sting was innocent of the charges, but was very hurt by allegations made by people who were supposed to be his friends. He chose to stay above the NWO-WCW war ... literally.

GRADE: B+

1997

In the rafters high above the ring, Sting became the conscience of WCW. His persona changed. Gone was the crew-cutted, marching band cheerleader enthusiastic surfer gimmick. His hair grew long and he used white face makeup to reflect his somber mood. He wore a trench coat and carried a black bat. Sting would not be duped again.

No one knew whether Sting would choose the NWO or WCW. Instead, he stood in the rafters watching events unfold. He would occasionally drop into the ring and conduct loyalty tests, provoking WCW wrestlers with his bat and then turning his back. If the wrestler didn't attack Sting, he could depend on him as a friend.

Eventually, Sting began playing silent mind games with the NWO. He rappelled from the rafters and came up below the ring to attack various members. He sent decoy Stings to distract them. Nearly every edition of *Nitro* ended with Sting facing off against the NWO—or at least thinking about it.

The secret behind the NWO phenomenon is that its members—even Hogan—were considered cool. Sting was the only cool member on the WCW side. So a clash between these forces was the reason for *Nitro's* 83-week winning streak against Raw between 1996 and 1998.

Sting vs. Hulk Hogan at Starrcade

Considering the intensity of the Monday Night War, it's amazing WCW had the discipline to keep Sting in the rafters for 15 months. In reality, Sting had been overbooked during the first phase of his WCW contract and already wrestled his mandatory number of matches. Sitting him in the rafters was a wise way to exploit his star-power without making him wrestle.

Sting wrestled only two matches in 1997. The first was against Hogan for the World title at Starrcade. One crucial mistake spoiled its impact, however. Sting legitimately failed to kick out when referee Nick Patrick went to make the presumed two-count. So, to everyone at the MCI Center and watching at home, it appeared that Hogan had pinned Sting in the opening minutes. But ringside enforcer Bret Hart said it was a fast count and ordered the match to continue. "The Stinger" captured his third WCW World title when Hogan submitted to the Scorpion Deathlock at 12:53.

Sting's second match came the very next night. Hogan protested the decision and Sting agreed to defend the title against him on *Nitro*. Again, Sting's hand was raised in the end, but his victory was less than clear-cut. 1998 was going to be a complicated year.

PWI Awards: Most Popular

GRADE: A+

1998

The controversy stemming from the Sting-Hogan debacle at Starrcade '97 carried into the New Year. On the premiere of *WCW Thunder* on January 8, Commissioner James J. Dillon declared the World title vacant, announcing that Sting would face Hogan for the championship at SuperBrawl. For the first time in 18 months, Sting spoke, telling Dillon, "You've got no guts." Then he turned to Hogan and said, "You're a dead man!"

Sting didn't kill Hogan at SuperBrawl—but he did beat "Hollywood" for his fourth WCW World title. Again, there was controversy, as Randy Savage—now on the outs with the NWO—interfered in the match to give Sting the victory.

While Sting remained popular, his threats against Hogan now rang hollow. He had failed to score a clean win over Hogan in three opportunities. The mythical figure that haunted the rafters was becoming a mortal wrestler again. Yet it's important to note that Sting has scored more victories over Hogan than any other superstar. Hogan has never pinned Sting. Sting successfully defended the World title against Scott Hall, Dallas Page, and Kevin Nash during his two months as champ. He ended up losing the belt to former friend Savage at Spring Stampede, thanks to Nash's interference.

Differences between Hogan and Nash led to the breakup of the NWO, with Nash forming NWO Wolfpac to combat Hogan's NWO Hollywood. Sting joined Nash and Konnan to feud with Hogan. Did he forget Nash and Konnan were keys in the NWO's reign of terror over the previous two years?

Sting unveiled a new red-and-black makeup scheme as a member of NWO Wolfpac. While pumpkin-faced Sting wasn't as popular as white-faced Sting, and his membership in the Wolfpac seems odd in hindsight, most fans overlooked this because they wanted to cheer Nash and Konnan anyway. As recently as March 2009, Sting and Nash were exchanging their Wolfpac hand signal to symbolize their solidarity in TNA'S Main Event Mafia.

Sting then began feuded with U.S. champion Bret Hart. They squabbled over which man had the best finisher: the Scorpion Deathlock or the Sharpshooter—two nearly identical holds. Hart viciously attacked Sting with a bat at Halloween Havoc, putting him out of action for the rest of the year.

In 1998, Sting earned two World title reigns and shared the World tag team title with The Giant and later Nash. Some of Sting's career moves were questionable, but it was hard to argue with his success.

PWI Awards: Comeback of the Year (first runner-up)

GRADE: A

1999

With WCW losing ground in the Monday Night War, thanks to the rise of "Stone-Cold" Steve Austin and the WWF's Attitude campaign, a revolving series of bookers tried absolutely everything to regain viewers. As a result, Sting's career track in 1999 was inconsistent, convoluted, and sometimes nonsensical.

As Sting recovered from Bret Hart's bat attack, NWO Wolfpac and NWO Hollywood surprised the wrestling world by merging back together, a move that was symbolized by Hollywood Hogan poking his finger in the chest of new WCW World champion Kevin Nash, who then laid down for Hogan to take his title.

Sting distanced himself from the re-formed NWO upon his return. He defeated "Diamond" Dallas Page for his fifth World title on the April 26 edition of *Monday Nitro*. It turned out that Sting would earn the dubious distinction of having the shortest WCW title reign ever—approximately 90 minutes. He lost the big gold belt back to Page in a four-way match also involving Bill Goldberg and Kevin Nash. WCW would become infamous for this brand of hot-shotting throughout 1999.

After battling fellow fan favorite Goldberg to a no-contest at Slamboree, Sting scored significant victories over Ric Flair and Dallas Page that summer. His reputation did take a blow, however, when he lost to former UWF tag team championship partner Rick Steiner in a falls-count-anywhere match at The Great American Bash. It got even sillier when he defeated Flair for the WCW presidency—and immediately gave it back to WCW.

Sting vs. Hulk Hogan

In what came to symbolize WCW's "see-if-anything-sticks" approach in its dying days, Sting dropped the make-up and turned heel, using his bat to beat Hulk Hogan into submission and take his sixth WCW World title. The problem was that many fans were sympathetic toward Sting and supported him in his feud with Hogan. "The Hulkster," allegedly tired of Sting's stunts, laid down for him at Halloween Havoc. Sting retained the World title in cheap fashion and issued an open challenge to anyone in the locker room.

To the champion's surprise, Goldberg answered the challenge and dropped Sting with the jackhammer within seconds to seemingly win the belt. The title was declared vacant the following night.

Following that fiasco, Luger turned on Sting, making "The Stinger" a fan favorite again. Then Sting befriended Elizabeth, who turned on him to join Luger. It was a somewhat disappointing year for Sting despite two World title reigns.

PWI Awards: Wrestler of the Year (second runner-up)

GRADE: A-

2000

The final full year of WCW's existence could've been disastrous for Sting, but it turned out that he was one of the few wrestlers that were involved in a memorable angle. Sting had become a mentor to Vampiro (sort of a cross between Sting and Beetlejuice). Yet, as happens in all of Sting's relationships, Vampiro exploited his good nature and betrayed his trust.

Vampiro stuck in the knife by costing Sting two major championships. He helped "Diamond" Dallas Page beat Sting in a tournament final for the World title. Then he helped Scott Steiner beat Sting in a tournament final for the U.S. title.

It got much uglier than that. Vampiro arranged for vats of blood to be poured on Sting from the rafters above. The two fought in a cemetery and in a "House Of Pain" match. The most horrific moment, though, was Vampiro dousing Sting in gasoline during an inferno match at The Great American Bash and shoving him from the 25-foot-high scaffolding near the entrance ramp.

Aside from its incredibly violent nature, the incident provoked loud criticism from those who believed it made light of Owen Hart's fatal fall from the rafters only a year earlier.

Sting was out for several weeks, to recover from his burns, and was attacked by newly minted heel Bill Goldberg upon his return. That feud went nowhere, and Sting went on to battle The Demon (Dale Torborg), who was nothing more than Vampiro-lite.

The veteran did score a big victory over Vampiro and old rival The Great Muta in a three-way match at Fall Brawl. Sting then had a largely forgettable feud with Jeff Jarrett, which culminated in Jarrett smashing a guitar over his head and pinning him at Halloween Havoc.

In late-2000, Sting was injured by Scott Steiner, who was on the fast track to becoming WCW's top star. Sting was on the sidelines for the rest of the year. It turned out that Sting would wrestle only one more match for WCW.

GRADE: B

2001

Sting was burned out. Scott Steiner's injury to Sting in late-2000 was orchestrated for storyline purposes to give the 15-year veteran time to spend with his family. Presumably, Sting would re-emerge sometime in 2001 with new momentum and challenge Steiner for the WCW World title. But there was more to the story. Sting was conflicted by his renewed dedication to Christianity and Vince Russo's sex-saturated vision for WCW. And the WWF was not an option because its product was even more lewd.

Like everyone else in WCW at the time, Sting was dejected, demoralized, and depressed. Booking had been so scattershot and desperate in recent years that fans were tired of Sting, Steiner, Goldberg, and the entire product. He was looking beyond wrestling to acting, motivational speaking, perhaps even the ministry.

Sting's exile ended when Vince McMahon purchased WCW on March 23. McMahon wanted to put together one final *Monday Nitro* to pay the obligatory tribute to WCW, hype the upcoming WrestleMania, and lay the groundwork for the WWF running WCW as a separate company. As we all know, the WWF failed to keep WCW alive. In hindsight, the March 23 edition of *Nitro* was not a new beginning, but a very definite end.

There's one thing that the WWF got right regarding the final *Nitro*: spotlighting Sting and Ric Flair in the main event. The Sting-Flair feud had dominated WCW's entire existence, and it was only fitting that this great rivalry was the last image seen by fans before WCW turned off the lights.

The match itself was less than spectacular. Both Sting and Flair had been on the injury reserve list for quite some time. Sting was clearly winded and struggling to complete the match. Flair was in even worse shape, forced to wear a T-shirt and relying on Sting to drag him across the finish line. Sting won the match, but that didn't matter. It meant so much because fans knew it was likely the very last time these two rivals would do battle. And Flair's embrace of Sting after the match offered a glimpse into the past greatness of WCW.

Sting enjoyed retirement and pursued non-wrestling projects for the rest of 2001. But it was only a matter of time before even Sting—who was financially secure and had found a higher calling in life—got the wrestling bug again.

GRADE: INCOMPLETE

Sting and Ric Flair at the last *WCW Nitro*

2002

After staying away from wrestling for most of the year, Sting made a significant comeback in November by participating in World Wrestling All-Stars' tour of Europe. Promoter Andrew McManus thought he could make a few bucks by putting together a roster of primarily ex-WCW wrestlers and taking them to parts of the world that had not seen them live on a regular basis.

Indeed, it took a substantial sum to lure Sting out of retirement. The relationship between Sting and Lex Luger soon became the focal point of the tour. Apparently, Sting had lobbied heavily for McManus to hire Luger for the tour. Luger was having all sorts of problems—physical, financial, and no doubt in Sting's view, spiritual.

The European fans were thrilled to see the icon lurking in the rafters again. It was the same Sting: the same Crow makeup, the same bat, and the same energy. Sting impressed the crowds by being in terrific shape. Luger, on the other hand, was overweight and exhausted for most of the tour.

And just like their days in WCW, Sting and Luger couldn't decide whether to be friends or rivals. Sting and Luger were partners for many stops on the European tour. But, at WWA's December 6 show in Glasgow, Scotland, Luger managed to beat Sting for the vacant WWA heavyweight title. One week later, Sting captured the belt in a three-way match also involving Malice (Jeremy Tuite) and defending champ Luger in Zurich, Switzerland.

By all reports, Sting enjoyed his return to wrestling. He was able to see old friends, such as Perry Saturn, Konnan, Mike Sanders, and Buff Bagwell. But he was very concerned about the health of his friend, Luger, who was suffering from pneumatic symptoms by the end of the tour.

The buzz began again. Would McManus use Sting to make WWA a force in the U.S.? Or would Sting's re-emergence make Vince McMahon more determined to sign him? Sting had become the ultimate free agent.

GRADE: B

2003

Is Sting going to WWE? Those rumors persisted throughout the first half of 2003. Although Sting's WWA title had yet to be defended in North America, the fact that he was the WWA champion encouraged those rumors. Why? Because the title had become known as a steppingstone to WWE, as two of its most recent champions—Nathan Jones and Scott Steiner—had signed with Vince McMahon.

There were also rumors of WWA's demise. A pre-taped pay-per-view had not sold very well in the States. Furthermore, a title-unification bout between WWA champion Sting and NWA champion Jeff Jarrett was scheduled for May 25 in Auckland, New Zealand. That was almost a sure sign that one promotion would not survive.

Fresh off successful title defenses against Shane Douglas and Rick Steiner in a three-way match, and a singles victory over Disco Inferno, Sting appeared physically ready for the showdown with Jarrett. But that wouldn't be enough.

About 10 minutes into the unification match, the referee was caught between Jarrett and a Stinger Splash. Sting executed the Scorpion Deathdrop and went for the pin attempt, but the referee was down. In the end, Rick Steiner interfered by smashing Jarrett's guitar over Sting's head, allowing Jarrett to score the pinfall and unify the NWA and WWA titles.

Despite his anger at Jarrett, Sting signed a limited contract with TNA 10 days later. He agreed to four appearances, at least temporarily squelching rumors that he was heading to WWE.

On June 18, Sting made his debut at TNA's one-year anniversary show, teaming with Jarrett—a fan favorite in TNA—to defeat A.J. Styles and Syxx-Pac (Sean Waltman). He also discussed his career and faith in a series of sit-down interviews with Mike Tenay.

In his first NWA World title shot in 13 years, Sting faced newly turned heel Jeff Jarrett for the belt on November 5. He scored a disqualification victory, but failed to regain the title. One week later, he teamed with Styles to beat Jarrett and Lex Luger. Sting ended his contractual obligations on a high note, defeating Jarrett in a non-title bout.

Sting continued to be lured by the prospect of competing in WWE for the very first time, but he appreciated how this bold fledgling promotion out of Nashville had treated him and how it did business. Over the past year, Sting had proven he could still go from a physical standpoint. The wrestling world was eyeing his next move.

GRADE: B

Sting with Jeff Jarrett

2004

Sting did not wrestle in 2004, although he was fairly visible in the media. He had left TNA on good terms and devoted himself to his family, including wife Sue, sons Garrett and Steven, and young daughter Grace. A Pentecostal Christian, Sting became more involved with Church on the Rock in Santa Clarita, California, where his brother, Jeff, was a senior pastor.

He also spent a lot of time producing and promoting a direct-to-video biographical film, *Sting: Moment Of Truth*. Sting played a veteran wrestler in the film, with actor Donnie Fallgatter playing the role of Sting as a rookie wrestler. A book version of his life, also titled *Sting: Moment Of Truth*, was released the same year.

"The Icon" appeared in another sit-down interview with Mike Tenay on the March 24 edition of *Impact* to promote his projects and discuss his journey to find deeper meaning. One week later, Sting served as a special enforcer for a four-way match featuring Abyss, Ron Killings, Raven, and A.J. Styles.

He proved to be a great goodwill ambassador for wrestling through his numerous promotional appearances, especially during his stints as guest host on Trinity Broadcasting Network's signature prime-time program, *Praise The Lord*.

GRADE: INCOMPLETE

2005

"The Stinger" took it easy for all of 2005 and didn't make any impact (no pun intended) until there were only a few minutes left. Only a few minutes before the clock struck 12, signaling the dawn of 2006, did Sting make real headlines. Amid fireworks and confetti on a special New Year's Eve edition of *Impact*, Christian Cage announced that Sting—who hadn't wrestled in TNA for more than two years—would be his partner against NWA champion Jeff Jarrett and Monty Brown at Final Resolution the following month.

There had been other foreshadows. Introducing December's Turning Point pay-per-view, Jeremy Borash and Shane Douglas announced that TNA would reveal a surprise that would "change the face of wrestling in 2006." As Jarrett celebrated a successful NWA title defense against Rhino in the closing minutes of the pay-per-view, the lights went out and an image of a scorpion emerged on the giant screen in the Impact Zone. Jarrett and cohort Scott D'Amore were trembling in fear as a spotlight focused on a chair, a black bat, and a pair of black boots.

Fans chanted "Sting! Sting! Sting!" Announcer Mike Tenay posed an important question just before the PPV went off the air: "Is Sting the face of wrestling in 2006?"

Sting hadn't even appeared on the program, yet his specter had reached mythic proportions.

Considering WWE had won the Monday Night War and free agents were of little importance in recent years, the appearance of Sting in WWE or TNA was one of the few surprises left in pro wrestling. WWE had done its best to lure Sting for nearly five years, and he reportedly had amicable phone conversations with Vince McMahon, but "The Stinger" had chosen his team.

His team would be TNA—and he would be a major player.

GRADE: INCOMPLETE

2006

Sting made his long-awaited return to pay-per-view when he teamed with Christian Cage to face NWA champion Jeff Jarrett and Monty Brown at Final Resolution. Would the 46-year-old Sting be the same force he was 20 years earlier? Could he still cut it?

The often-critical crowd at the Impact Zone was amazed by Sting's performance. Dropkicks, flying shoulderblocks, and Stinger Splashes … it was as if TNA fans were watching Clash of the Champions or Starrcade. But they weren't. Some legends would have caught frequent breathers on the ring apron while their younger partners did the heavy lifting. Sting did not. He was every bit as vital a force in the match as Cage.

Sting vs. Jeff Jarrett for NWA World championship

Better still, Sting punctuated the match by planting the hated Jarrett with a Scorpion Deathdrop for the win. Chants of "Welcome back" and "You've still got it" rang throughout the Impact Zone.

However, Sting stunned the fans when he made his debut on Spike TV for the January 28 edition of *Impact*. He claimed the main reason he accepted the match at Final Resolution was to say a proper goodbye to the fans, something that was denied him on the final *Monday Nitro* in 2001. He dropped his trademark bat in the ring and said goodbye to TNA wrestlers as he exited the Impact Zone.

Fortunately, that was not the end of Sting in TNA. Jarrett didn't believe Sting was going to retire and sent Alex Shelley to videotape his activities at his home in California. An incensed Sting—sans makeup—confronted Jarrett at Destination X, and received a beatdown at the hands of Jarrett's Army, most notably Scott Steiner.

Sting returned to TNA full-force, feuding with Jarrett throughout the year. He put his career on the line to entice Jarrett into defending the NWA World title against him at Bound for Glory. It worked. With new arrival Kurt Angle as special referee, Sting won his first NWA World title in 15 years.

The year ended on a sour note, however, as Abyss beat Sting for the World title at the next pay-per-view. It marked the only time the NWA title was allowed to change hands on a disqualification, a bizarre development indeed.

PWI Awards: Comeback of the Year; Feud of the Year (vs. Jeff Jarrett, second runner-up); Most Popular (third runner-up)

GRADE: A

2007

At Final Resolution, Sting had the opportunity to regain the NWA World title from Abyss. The only wrinkle was that it would be a three-way elimination match also involving Christian Cage, who had turned on Sting the previous year. So it was Sting vs. two guys who hated him. The odds were poor from the outset.

Sting did gain some revenge against Abyss, pinning the champion to eliminate him from the match. But his luck didn't hold out against Cage, who pinned Sting to become NWA World champion.

Did this fuel Sting's desire to regain the belt? No. Instead, we saw Sting the nurturer, who made it his mission to rescue Abyss from the evil clutches of James Mitchell. He adopted a tough-love approach, beating Abyss in a "Prison Yard" match at Against All Odds and in a "Last Rites" match at Destination X. As part of Team Cage, he even pinned Abyss in a "Lethal Lockdown" match against Team Angle.

The wrestler who scored the winning pinfall at Lockdown was supposed to receive an NWA World title shot. But Kurt Angle challenged Sting for the title shot. The match did not have a clear outcome due to the interference of Team Cage, so the scheduled bout at Sacrifice was changed to a three-way involving Sting, Angle, and Christian Cage. More controversy ensued. Sting tapped out to Angle's anklelock as he was pinning Cage at the same time. TNA Managing Director Jim Cornette declared the title vacant, with the new champion to be determined in a "King Of The Mountain" match at Slammiversary.

Sting ended up getting a raw deal. Christopher Daniels interfered during Sting's qualifying match with Samoa Joe, ensuring "The Stinger" was out of the KOTM. The result was a brief feud with Daniels, whom Sting defeated with a Scorpion Deathdrop at Slammiversary.

That summer, Sting and Angle briefly shared the TNA World tag team title. They suffered an embarrassing loss to Ron Killings and Adam "Pacman" Jones at No Surrender, and Angle blamed Sting for the loss. That led to Sting battling Angle for the TNA World title at Bound for Glory, held in Atlanta on October 14, Sting won the title—his first TNA World championship—for the second consecutive year at Bound for Glory. As with his title reign the previous year, Sting didn't survive long. He lost the belt back to Angle two days later at an Impact taping.

That seemed to be Sting's track record: Signs of championship greatness, but no reign that was truly satisfying.

PWI Awards: Most Popular (second runner-up); Inspirational Wrestler (third runner-up)

GRADE: A-

2008

Following a five-month hiatus to spend time with his family, Sting returned to the *Impact* Zone on March 27 to announce he would join Team Cage—comprised of Christian Cage, Kevin Nash, Rhino, and Matt Morgan—to battle Team Tomko, consisting of Travis Tomko, A.J. Styles, James Storm, and Team 3-D in a "Lethal Lockdown" match at Lockdown. Team Cage was victorious at that pay-per-view.

Still, Sting was not a weekly presence on *Impact*. He had become The Undertaker of TNA: The specter of Sting hanging over the Impact Zone was almost more effective than "The Stinger" actually making an appearance. That way, Sting wouldn't be burdened with a heavy schedule and his in-ring forays would be more meaningful.

Indeed, one of Sting's most dramatic appearances of 2008 didn't even take place in the ring. TNA champ Samoa Joe and mentor Kevin Nash were just beginning to trade blows when Sting's music was enough to break it up. Up high in the rafters, there was Sting watching Joe and Nash with disdain.

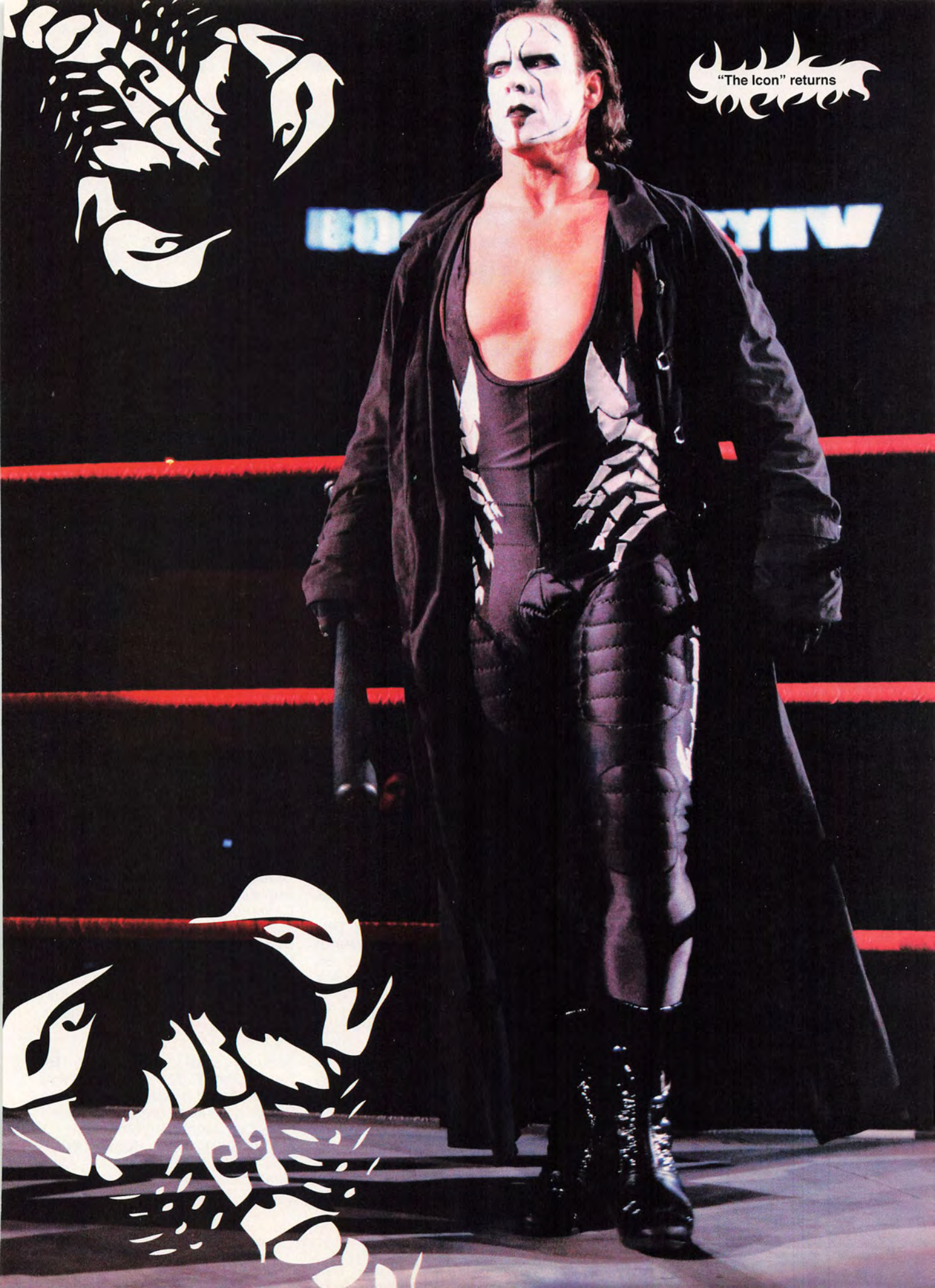
When Samoa Joe unleashed his full fury on Booker T at Victory Road, Sting intervened, trying to talk Joe into backing off to avoid a disqualification. Joe rebuked him disrespectfully, and Sting struck him with his black bat. Similarly, Sting attacked A.J. Styles after he had wrestled a last-man-standing match against Kurt Angle.

Was Sting turning heel? In Sting's mind, he was turning bad for a good reason. He stated that Joe, Styles, and TNA's other rising stars should be taught to respect the veterans who helped build the business.

Sting definitely taught Samoa Joe a lesson by pinning him at Bound for Glory, the third consecutive year he won the World title at that pay-per-view. Nash struck Joe with Sting's bat to help Sting win the championship, so a lot of fans were confused by the icon's actions. In October, Sting formed the Main Event Mafia with Kurt Angle, Booker T, Kevin Nash, and Scott Steiner.

"The Stinger" had major issues with all four of his fellow MEM members in the past. And the MEM reeked of the NWO. So why would Sting side with these heels over TNA's younger stars? Was he becoming selfish in his older age? Or was there a greater morality play at work?

GRADE: A+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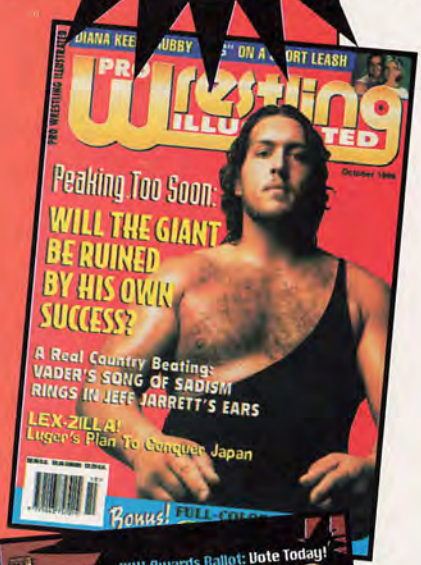

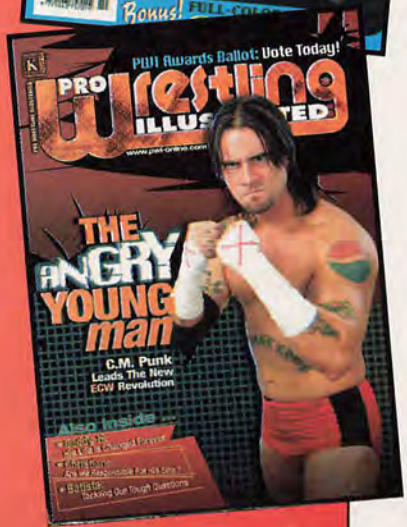

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TYLER BLACK

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The popular Age of the Fall standout had a career-making match last March when he took Ring of Honor champion Nigel McGuinness to the limit at Take No Prisoners. Black also won another tag title with Jimmy Jacobs before that team split, and defeated Go Shiozaki to win the FIP heavyweight title. He hasn't been able to get the best of McGuinness yet, but he's given the ROH champ some of the most difficult challenges of his reign. Now that McGuinness has suffered a biceps injury, Black is in prime position to replace him as the ROH titlist. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: Black and The Age of the Fall were a cult phenomenon, their hype beginning on Internet message boards before Jacobs, Black, and Necro Butcher exploded onto the scene. Thanks to his memorable battles against McGuinness and Bryan Danielson, Black is a full-fledged fan favorite. Much like C.M. Punk, he is a solid wrestler with a bad attitude and an "alternative" feel. ROH fans are rallying around him and acknowledging him as the company's next breakout star. **GRADE: B**

Photos by Joe Zanolle

REPERTOIRE: Black is a creative competitor who has been able to combine a variety of existing moves and make them into something entirely different. His God's Last Gift finisher is a twisting fisherman's suplex into an inside cradle. His Paroxysm is a lifting "slop drop," almost a reverse brainbuster. His phoenix splash and moonsaults are things of beauty, and he is second only to Shawn Michaels in his ability to snap off a superkick that makes his opponents loopy. The only knock on him is his size (6'1", 210). He lacks upper body strength and can be manhandled by larger opponents, which makes all those razzle-dazzle moves meaningless. Another 10 pounds of muscle would be a big help and shouldn't affect his mobility or agility. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Black is on the cusp of true superstardom. He's knocking on McGuinness' door, and he has been for several months now. As of this writing, the severity of McGuinness' injury is largely unknown. If Black's lucky, the champion won't be forced to relinquish the title. He really needs to score a convincing win over McGuinness in a title match (he has already done it in a non-title match). Winning the belt in a tournament or some other way would rob him of the moment the fans have been anticipating for the past year. He's ready to become ROH's top star. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Black has the potential to represent a changing of the guard in ROH. Even if he fails to win the ROH title, he still has a strong fan base and is a superior in-ring performer. He's young (22), charismatic, and just hitting his stride. There is still some question about how he can fare against top competition in high-stakes matches, but Black seems to be the real deal. **GRADE: B**

BRYAN DANIELSON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Despite an astonishing win-loss record against a verifiable Who's Who of independent wrestling talent in recent months, Danielson remains haunted by his inability to complete two major, longstanding goals. First and foremost is his quest to become the first-ever two-time Ring of Honor champion. He got close last year, but was turned away in a brutally hard-fought match against titleholder Nigel McGuinness, and has been denied a rematch since. Second is Danielson's hope to become the first man to win ROH's version of the "Triple Crown" by winning the tag team title (he captured the now-defunct Pure title in 2006). Things looked promising on that front after Danielson formed a team with on-again/off-again rival Austin Aries last year, but the partnership dissipated just as the duo seemed to be gaining momentum. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: Danielson boasts more personality and charisma than he is generally given credit for. Nonetheless, he is not the type of performer one tends to associate with any level of mainstream appeal. Still, his no-frills, no-nonsense approach has earned him a large cult following on the indy circuit. There, he is free to express himself with few limitations in the ring, without having to worry too much about entertaining the fans outside of it. Oddly enough, his entrance theme, "The Final Countdown," usually inspires a sing-along from fans and critics alike. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: There may not be another wrestler in North America, and few around the world, who can match Danielson's wrestling IQ. His vast knowledge of wrestling styles and philosophies is second to none, as he has proven with his ability to chain wrestle, brawl, fly, or even cheat with the best of them. Danielson's Cattle Mutilation is a painful hold that doesn't always finish a match, but often results in its weakened victim falling prey to his dragon suplex, diving headbutt, or rapid elbowsmash sequence. The "American Dragon" is difficult to scout because he has come up with so many ways to beat his opponents. **GRADE: A+**

CAREER GROWTH: Addressing the audience after ROH had wrapped up its first set of tapings for its new television program on HDNet, Danielson thanked the fans, noting that making it to television marked a huge milestone in his career. And, make no mistake, ROH would not be where it is today without him. In something of a surprise, he also announced that he was not sure how much longer he will continue wrestling, citing various injuries accumulated over the years. Danielson could walk away today and would be considered one of ROH's all-time greats. But there are holes in his resume that he seems hellbent on filling. **GRADE: B-**

Photos by Joe Zanolle

OVERALL VALUE: Whether he has a belt around his waist or not, Danielson is Ring of Honor. While he would likely be underused in WWE and may or may not be able to carve out a successful run with TNA, he is valued and appreciated (if not revered) right where he is. We have little doubt that Danielson will rise to the top of the ROH mountain again. It's only a matter of time. But that is likely as far as his career will take him. **GRADE: B**

JOHN BRADSHAW LAYFIELD

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The so-called "Wrestling God" wasn't able to add any more world championships to his resume, but he did score a PPV win over John Cena and won the Intercontinental title. That's not too shabby for a guy who already retired once and is rumored to be headed back to retirement in the very near future. A lot of critics thought JBL's championship reigns on Smackdown were an aberration, the combination of an unscrupulous wrestler, a weak roster, and a whole lot of luck. When Layfield began competing for the Raw brand at the end of 2007, he answered those critics. He may not have the physique of an Adonis, but he held his own against some of Raw's top names, including Cena, C.M. Punk, and Batista. **GRADE: B+**

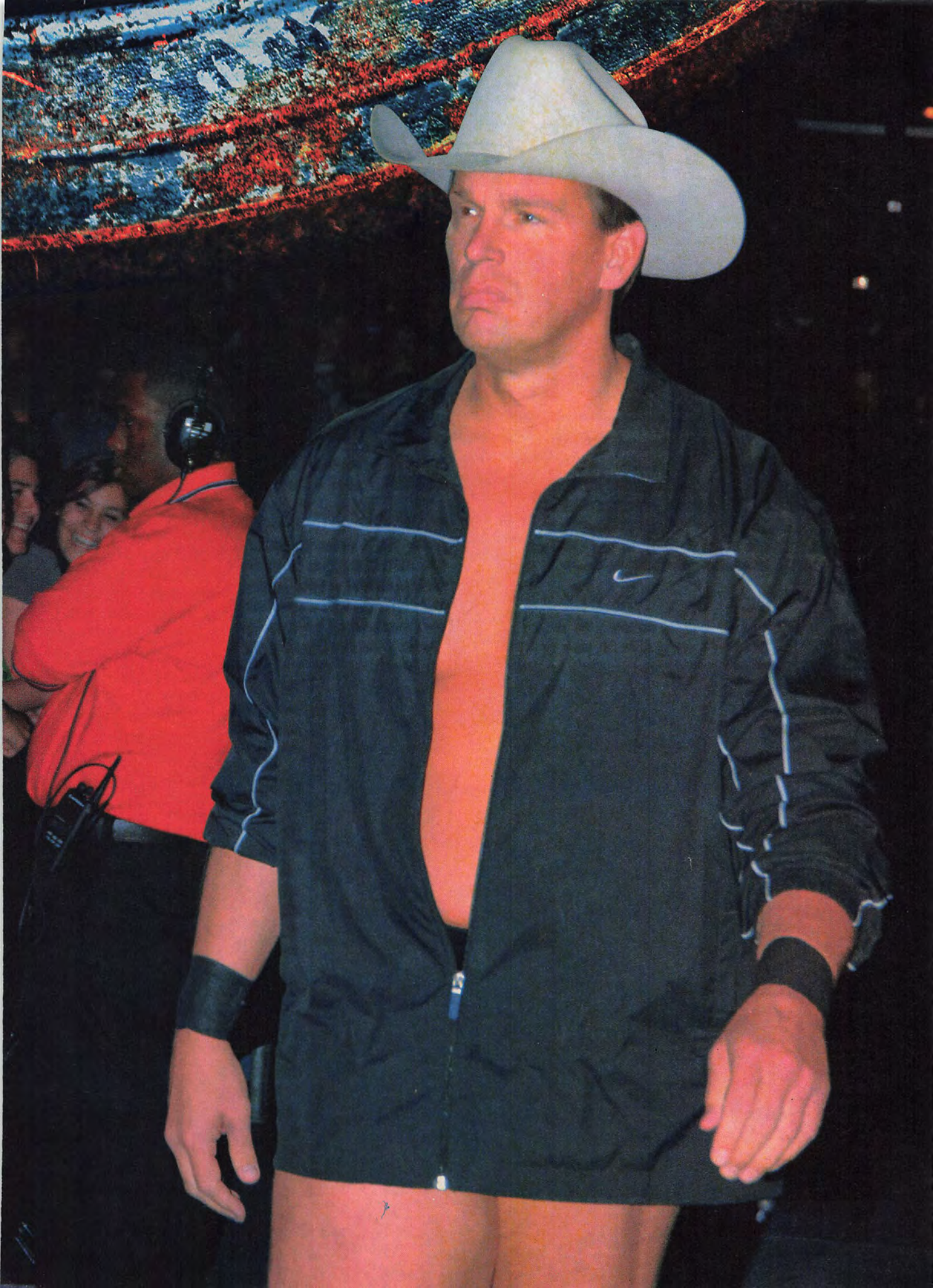
MARKETABILITY: Believe it or not, Layfield is one of the most marketable competitors in the sport. JBL is a savvy investor and market analyst. He regularly appears as a financial commentator on FOX Business Network and hosts his own radio show. He licensed his own energy/weight loss drink and recently bought into the former WWE developmental system Ohio Valley Wrestling. JBL is more than a successful wrestler; he's a successful businessman. He is actually respected by the mainstream media and comes across as knowledgeable—if occasionally controversial—in a variety of subjects outside of wrestling. He may not sell a lot of swag, but if there's one man Vince McMahon wants at the bargaining table next to him, it's JBL. **GRADE: B+**

Photos by George Napolitano

REPERTOIRE: JBL's playbook is pretty basic. He's going to beat you up until he incapacitates you with a Clothesline From Hell. He's a big, raw-boned barroom brawler, and he does it well. Sure, it would help if he added more submission moves to his repertoire and if he brushed up on his grappling, but he's not about to make dramatic changes at this stage of the game. JBL is what he is, he has his limitations, and they don't bother him. **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: The Intercontinental title is a bit of a step down for a man who had world championship aspirations, but when you consider he defeated former World champion Punk for that title, it's a bit more impressive. In fact, JBL actually helps improve the prestige of the I-C title, which has been pretty inconsequential lately. Layfield proved he could be a top-level heel on the most-watched brand in wrestling. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Few wrestlers can draw the level of heat that JBL does. The fans despise Layfield and love seeing him get knocked off his high horse. His matches may not be five-star classics, but they're usually stiff and entertaining. He's a great promo man and has enough credibility to be a legitimate threat to any wrestler. Plus, as a self-made man and entrepreneur, he's actually one of pro wrestling's best ambassadors, even if the fans hate him. JBL has been a vital piece of WWE this year, and the company will miss him if the rumors of his retirement are true. **GRADE: B**



MICHELLE McCOOL

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The "All-American Diva" seemed well on her way to living up to the Trish Stratus comparisons when she upset the favored Natalya to win the WWE's inaugural Divas championship. She was always popular among male fans for her looks, but McCool also gained universal respect for her talents in the ring. However, she has been a mini-slump. McCool lost the title, turned heel, and burned bridges with other fan favorites in the women's division. She has not looked that great in key matches since then, even matches she's won. Perhaps that explains some of the frustrations she's taken out on her former allies. Nevertheless, McCool remains one of the WWE's top Divas. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: In many ways, McCool is the perfect spokesperson for the new TV-PG era of WWE. At least until her heel turn, she projected a family-friendly image, while still appealing to teenage and young adult male viewers. With her master's degree in educational leadership and teaching background, she presents an intelligent, well-spoken image as well. It's little surprise that she has been chosen by WWE to make non-wrestling appearances on game shows and talk shows. Her name consistently shows up on Yahoo's top search list. **GRADE: A**

Photo by George Napolitano

REPERTOIRE: McCool received much of her initial training from Finlay, and is better schooled in the basics of pro wrestling than most of the other Divas. She can gain pinfalls by her Faith Breaker finisher or force opponents to tap out to her heel hook. As she has shifted her focus away from managing to wrestling, she's improved her execution and diversified her set-up moves beyond a few simple kicks, backbreakers, and slams. Always in tremendous shape, McCool is one of most naturally athletic Divas. She has an underrated ability to bounce back from punishment, and has not lost flexibility despite injuries. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Ever since Trish Stratus retired, WWE has been looking for a Diva who can gain (and sustain) the same type of following. McCool has yet to prove she's the one who can assume the mantle of the company's undisputed top female star, but she has that potential. At age 29, she is hitting the prime of her career. **GRADE: A-**

OVERALL VALUE: McCool is entering a key phase of her career. WWE has significantly improved the quality of its women's roster, with the formidable likes of Gail Kim, Natalya, and Beth Phoenix all eminently capable of dominating many of the roster holdovers. McCool has the opportunity for greatness, but she needs to make her big move soon, and sustain that momentum. **GRADE: B+**

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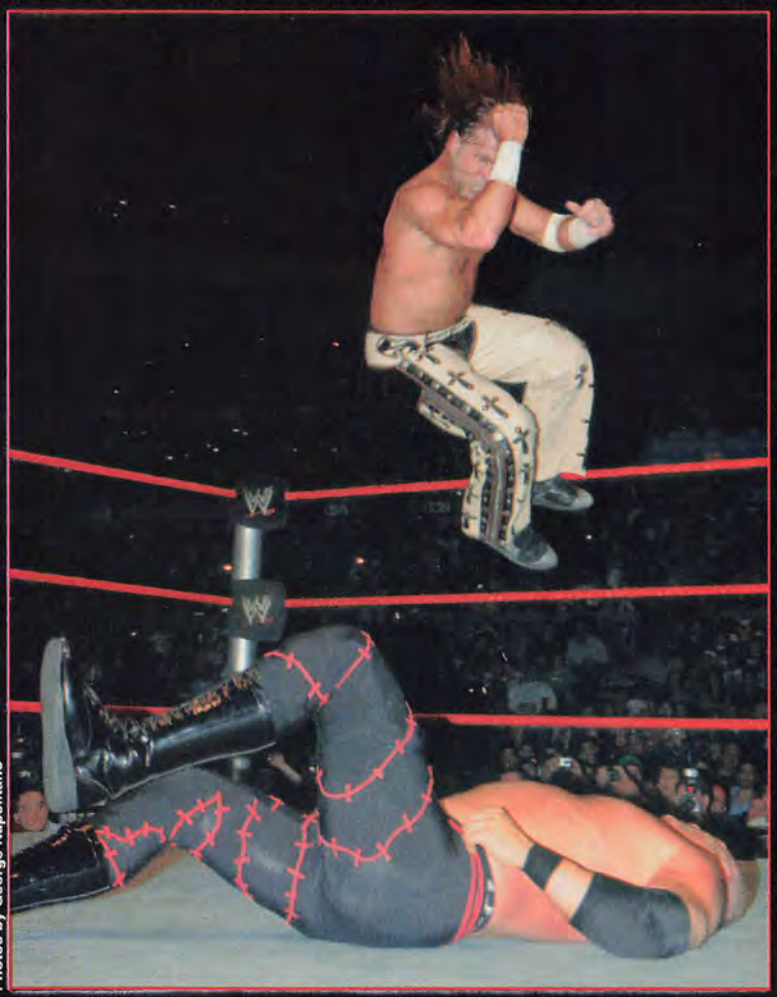
SHAWN MICHAELS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It seems like the "Heartbreak Kid" has been cursed ever since he retired Ric Flair at WrestleMania 24. He got on Batista's bad side, got called out by Chris Jericho, nearly lost his vision, watched his wife get punched in the jaw, lost all of his money in the recession, and ticked off The Undertaker. Talk about bad karma! Michaels has had a hectic year, but he keeps bouncing back. His match against Undertaker was the most anticipated bout of this year's 'Mania, so he made it back to the spotlight just months after being forced to be JBL's indentured servant. He finished the year strong after a series of pitfalls. **GRADE: B-**



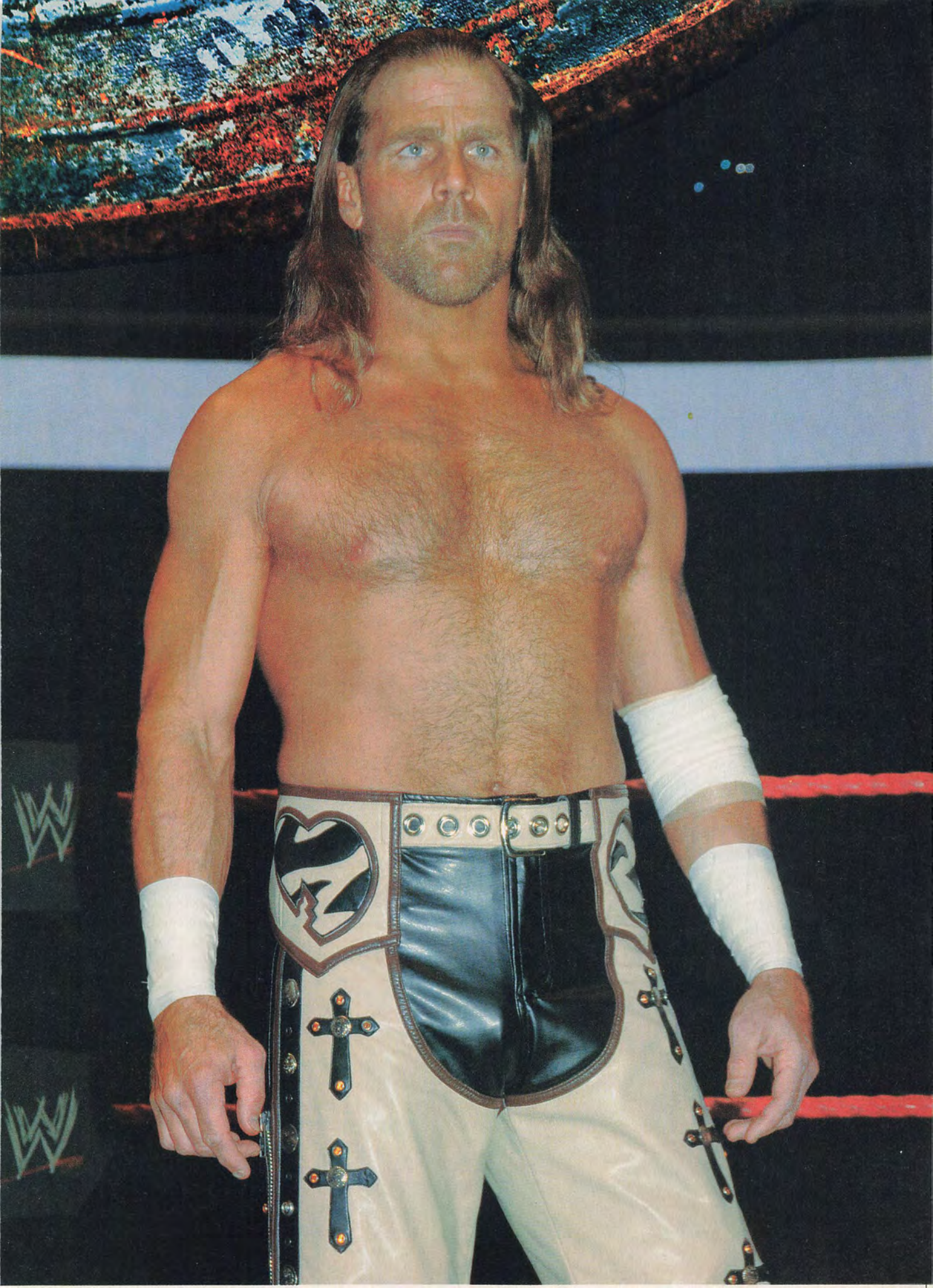
Photos by George Napolitano

MARKETABILITY: Go to wweshop.com. Type "Michaels" into the search field and you'll get 114 matches, including teddy bears, iPhone arm straps, T-shirts, cowboy hats, "Vinyl Aggression" bobbleheads, DVDs, school accessories, drawstring bags … yeah, you could say he's marketable. **GRADE: A+**

REPERTOIRE: Michaels is as quick as a hiccup and as lethal as a sniper. His Sweet Chin Music has felled men larger than twice his size. He's never been the best mat wrestler, but he's savvy enough to avoid situations that expose him to excessive risk. He's had his share of injuries, but you can hardly tell by watching him wrestle. He looks as good today as he ever has. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Michaels has allowed himself to fall out of the immediate World title picture, but he will be a legitimate threat to any championship until the day he decides to hang up the boots for good. The past year hasn't been a story of a title chase—it's been a story of redemption. He did what he had to do in retiring Flair, suffered the consequences of that action in his feud with Batista, stood up to Jericho, and lost everything but his dignity. This year, we finally saw the maturation of Shawn Michaels. He is repairing a legacy that had been tainted by his backstage politicking, suspicious "injuries," and the infamous Montreal screwjob. Although he didn't win any major championships in the past year, it was still impressive, although a title victory would've been grounds for an A+ in this category. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Michaels can still be counted upon to deliver show-stealing matches. His feuds and promos resonate like few others. He always brings excitement and controversy. He has become a mentor to younger competitors and has left his famed ego at the door. He has gracefully stepped aside for John Cena, Randy Orton, Edge, and others to ascend to the main event level, and it hasn't affected his popularity one bit. **GRADE: B**



THE MIZ & JOHN MORRISON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: There's an old wrestling axiom that sometimes a tag team is simply greater than the sum of its parts. That definitely seems to be the case with The Miz and John Morrison, as the two former reality-TV stars have somehow managed to become the most successful tag team on the Raw brand. They have won tag titles on both Raw and Smackdown, received the Slammy award for Tag Team of the Year, and were the first runner-up for Tag Team of Year in the *PWI* Achievement Awards. They also came very close to beating Triple-H and Shawn Michaels in a DX reunion last October on Raw. They've come a long way in a relatively short period of time. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: One of the main reasons Miz and Morrison have made it as far as they have is because of their ability to promote themselves. They broke into the business through *Tough Enough* and both found ways to stand out from the pack. When they weren't getting much face time on TV, they launched their "Dirt Sheet" segments on wwe.com, which resulted in a renewed push on television. They know the importance of being flashy; even if they offend some people, they still make sure they do something to stand out. Nicknames like "The Shaman Of Sexy" and "The Chick Magnet" look good on T-shirts, too. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Morrison has developed into a very talented singles competitor. In some ways, he reminds us of a young Shawn Michaels. The Miz isn't anywhere near that level, yet, but he's smart enough to mind his limitations and focus on the things he can do very well, such as his "Reality Check" slam and clothesline into the corner. The team is somewhat lacking in effective double-team moves, and Miz can get in trouble quickly when forced to counter-wrestle. **GRADE: C+**

Photos by George Napolitano

CAREER GROWTH: These days, it's rare to find a tag team that can survive more than a year or two. Miz and Morrison have great chemistry together. They seem to bring out the best in one another, and they are still improving as a team. Morrison—a former ECW and Intercontinental champion—might be tempted to try his hand as a singles competitor once again, but another year together, and Miz and Morrison might just develop into the top team in the sport. They're on their way ... if they can keep from self-destructing. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: Tag team wrestling has been badly devalued by WWE in recent years. Miz and Morrison might just have the spark to build more interest in the art of tag team competition. The title unification match at WrestleMania could be the first step in consolidating teams between the two brands and restoring some luster to the tag title. If WWE is committed to building more interest in tag wrestling, Miz and Morrison are poised to spearhead that movement. But if there's no commitment to tag wrestling, their value as a team is limited. Now, Morrison as a singles competitor, that's a whole different story. **GRADE: B**

TAG TEAM
CHAMPIONS

TED DiBIASE JR. & CODY RHODES

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Cody Rhodes and Ted DiBiase Jr. made a Faustian bargain; they traded in their status as WWE World tag team champions to become flunkies for Randy Orton. "Priceless" lost their tag belts in the process, but they became vital figures in the top storyline in WWE (Randy Orton vs. Triple-H) in the process. Both second-generation stars have come a long way from where they were one year ago, but the unsettling fact of the matter is that they did not receive a meaningful match at WrestleMania 25. They have allowed themselves to become supporting characters in a major feud instead of being principle players. They've come a long way, but they cannot allow themselves to become stooges. Just ask Curt Hawkins and Zack Ryder. **GRADE: B-**

Photo by Shane M. Kidder

MARKETABILITY: Rhodes and Orton have the pedigree, they have the confidence, and they have the skills. They have the potential to be two of WWE's biggest singles stars of the next decade. Right now, however, they are simply Orton's supporting cast. They might as well embroider "Goon 1" and "Goon 2"on their T-shirts. Any marketability they built up as the snobby Priceless has been squandered, but the potential remains. **GRADE: C+**

REPERTOIRE: As second-generation competitors, Rhodes and DiBiase have been students of the game since a young age. They've learned the basics. They may have come too far too fast, though. When facing top competition (such as John Cena, Batista, and Triple-H), Rhodes and DiBiase Jr. have been completely overwhelmed. They abandon all ring strategy and resort to cheating and double-team moves. Their biggest obstacle—both as a team and as individuals—is to realize they belong in the big leagues. They can compete against name competitors. They need to remember the fundamentals—Rhodes' bulldog, lariat, and figure-four; DiBiase's Million-Dollar Dream legsweep, fistdrop, and suplexes—and succeed with the skills that got them this far. Shortcuts don't work. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: Every rulebreaking clique loves to compare itself to The Four Horsemen. Rhodes and DiBiase may see themselves as the enforcers with Orton in the Ric Flair role. What they must remember is that the Horsemen who supported Flair got their own rewards. Tully Blanchard and Arn Anderson had several runs as NWA World tag champions. Because they were good soldiers, the group helped them get tag title shots and made sure they made the most of their opportunities. What has Orton done for DiBiase and Rhodes? The time is coming when they should hold Orton's feet to the fire and demand support from him. It's not fair for them to sublimate their title aspirations for his. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Rhodes and DiBiase have already achieved more in their young careers than many other wrestlers will in their lives. They have had their ups and downs, but two tag title reigns and the promise of more great things to come makes them … well, almost priceless. **GRADE: B**

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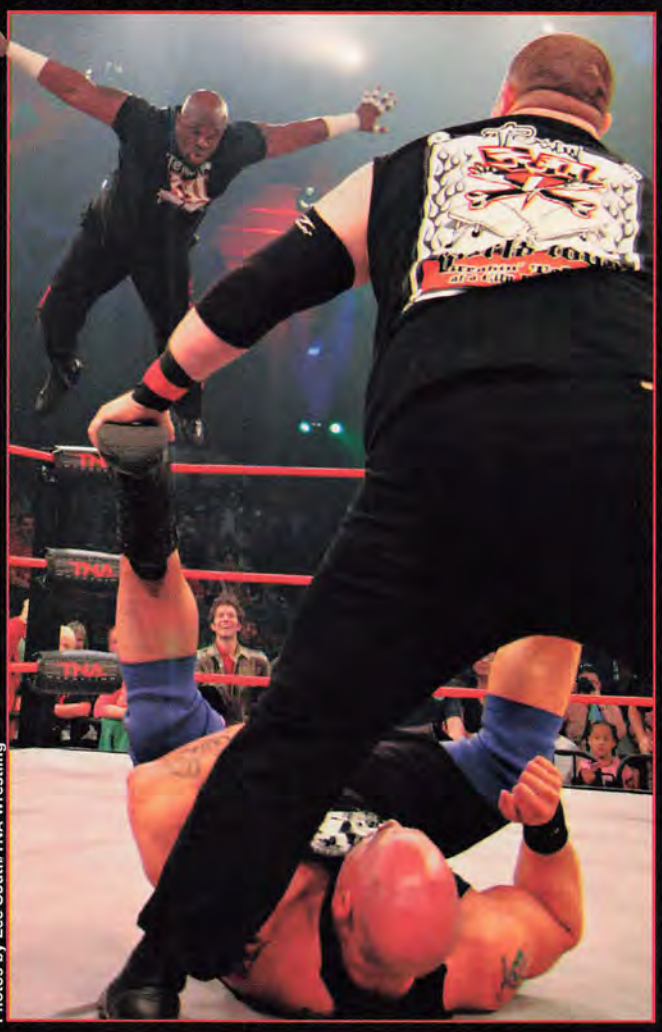
TEAM 3-D

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Team 3-D often refers to itself as the most decorated tag team in wrestling history, and it's becoming increasingly difficult for their detractors to argue the claim. Brother Ray and Brother Devon added to their crowded trophy case their 22nd tag team title when they defeated Toru Yano and Togi Makabe for the IWGP straps earlier this year in Tokyo. In doing so, they became the only duo ever to hold the original ECW, WWE, WCW (WWE version), TNA, NWA, and IWGP tag team titles. Team 3-D also remains the most consistent threat to current TNA tag kingpins Beer Money Inc. They are still going strong while approaching the 13th anniversary of their initial pairing at the ECW Arena in South Philadelphia. **GRADE: A-**



Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

MARKETABILITY: Ray and Devon are on the cusp of universal acceptance as wrestling legends, thanks to their unmatched track record of tag team accomplishments. Yet, as marketable commodities, their act has grown somewhat stale in recent years. Aside from a slight change in ring attire every now and then, there is very little to distinguish the Team 3-D era from that of the duo's days as the Dudley Boyz, prior to coming to TNA. Same look, same moves, same interviews, etc. We're not suggesting that Ray and Devon, arguably the best tag team ever, should try to reinvent themselves. But it is 2009, and sometimes Team 3-D carries itself as if it's forever trapped in 1999. **GRADE: C+**

REPERTOIRE: Again, it's difficult to argue with proven success. Team 3-D isn't known for flashy in-ring maneuvers, but its effective set of signature individual and tandem moves continue to get the job done. From the "Wazzup! Headbutt" to the 3-D (including several modified versions) to their masterful use of tables as a weapon of choice, Ray and Devon rarely deviate from their game plan. Probably because it works. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: Short of inventing a time machine and going back to challenge for Verne Gagne's AWA World tag team title, there isn't a whole lot of new ground for Team 3-D to cover. Ray and Devon each made a brief bid for Sting's TNA World title earlier this year while feuding with the Main Event Mafia after siding with the Frontline faction, but quickly went back to shooting for tag team gold. And that's where they belong. The proof was in their IWGP tag title win, which only served to add to their legacy as one of, if not the, greatest teams of all-time. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Tag team wrestling has long been one of TNA's stronger suits, and to have a team that carries the prestige of Team 3-D around to anchor the division is very important. Ray and Devon have retained their popularity and appeal—particularly to longtime fans of the hardcore style—and whether they are currently carrying gold or not, remain the measuring stick by which all other teams in the company are judged. **GRADE: B**

TEAM
3D
BRD DEVON

AUSTIN ARIES

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The former Ring of Honor champion and TNA competitor has always marched to his own drummer. Some have questioned his attitude and focus, and Aries sometimes seems to be his own worst enemy. He gets sidetracked in feuds and then just as suddenly shifts direction. Nevertheless, Aries is a threat to recapture the ROH crown at any time. With a little bit more focus, he could perennially be one of the top challengers to Nigel McGuinness. There is no questioning the man's ability. **GRADE: B-**

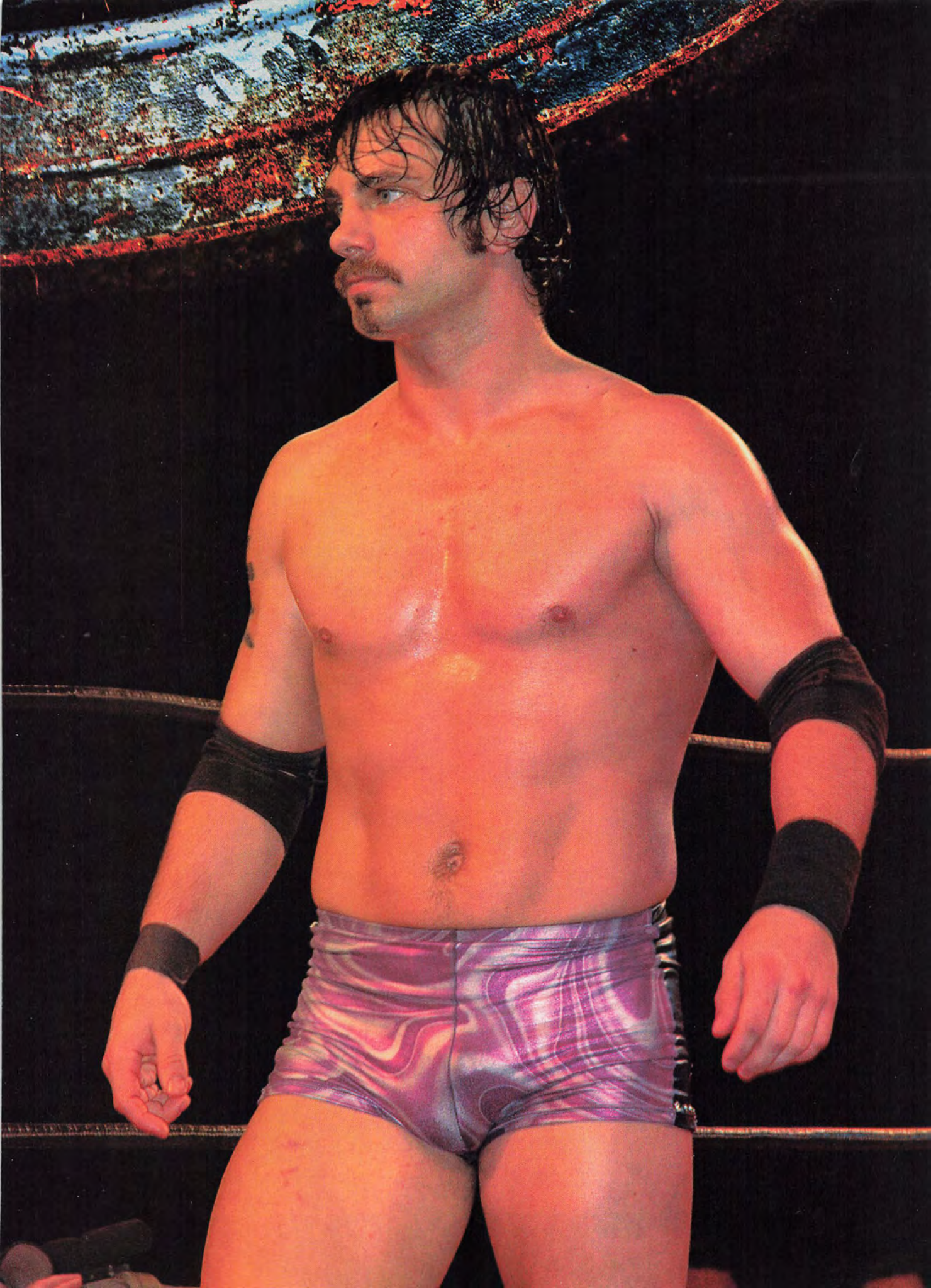
MARKETABILITY: Aries is somewhat undersized at 5'9" and a little more than 200 pounds. That works against him. More importantly, his outspokenness hinders his ability to work in the big promotions, as his stint in TNA showed. As an independent wrestler, the main focus is on his talent and ability to wrestle both traditional and gimmick matches effectively. Much like Rob Van Dam, some of his non-wrestling beliefs (such as Aries' vocal passion for vegetarianism) and lifestyle habits make him an outsider in traditional circles. He may yet have another stint in one of the two big promotions, but it's hard to envision him receiving more than a midcard push. **GRADE: C+**

REPERTOIRE: Move-for-move, the 30-year-old can match up to just about anyone in the wrestling business. He can take to the air, possesses an array of takedowns and suplexes, and executes various reversals with precision. His arsenal has always been well-suited for the Ring of Honor style, and could also be adapted to the Japanese style. With a little bit more diversity in his attitude, Aries is possibly one who could take his game to a whole new level. When he's motivated, Aries can put on a wrestling clinic. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Aries' career sometimes seems to be going in circles. He has done well since returning to ROH after his release from TNA. However, his loss to McGuinness sent him into a tailspin for a while, and he showed his frustration in the ring by ignoring the ROH code of honor. Just when he seemed to be locked in for another run at the ROH title, he decided to divert his attention by simultaneously wrestling in CHIKARA. He would be better served by setting a single goal and sticking to it. **GRADE: B-**

Photos by Joe Zanolle

OVERALL VALUE: Aries possesses a skill level that makes for high-intensity, entertaining matches. He has been a valuable commodity to the ROH roster while maintaining his own self-styled approach. Nevertheless, Aries runs the risk of eventually getting bypassed if he doesn't stick with his game plan to regain the ROH championship. The detours he takes could hurt his long-term value. **GRADE: B-**



BOOKER T

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: What is there left to accomplish when you are a 44-year-old, six-time world champion who isn't ready to give up the spotlight? Booker T has apparently been asking himself the same questions over the past year. His answers have been to join a group of aging stars (Main Event Mafia), gang up on younger talents, create an all-new title belt (the TNA Legends championship) and then award it to himself. Booker's loss of the Legends belt to rival A.J. Styles was a definite setback. Nevertheless, Booker remains a highly skilled and cunning wrestler. **GRADE: C+**

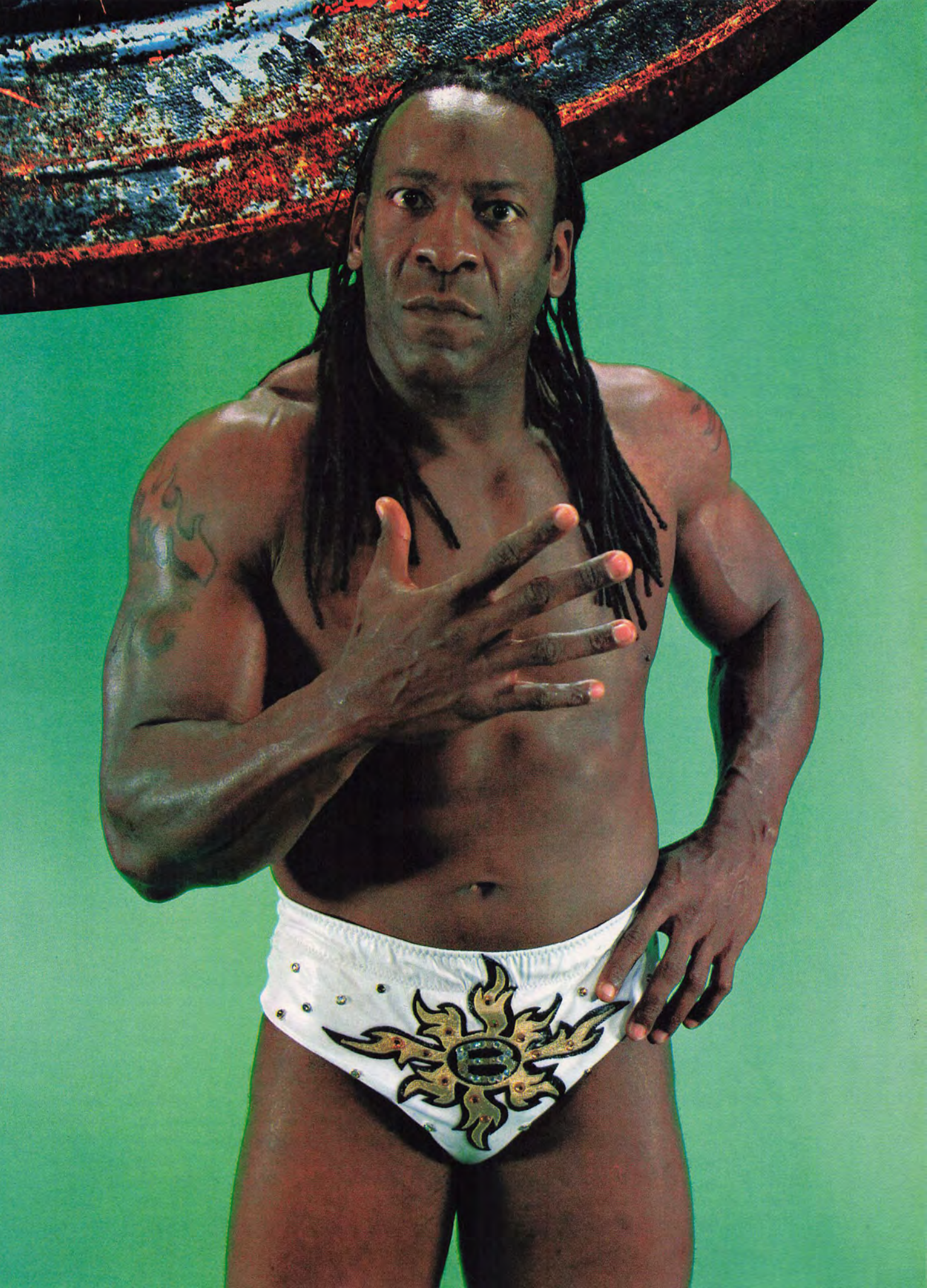
MARKETABILITY: Booker's presence in TNA lends credibility to the promotion as a rival to WWE. While he's getting to the age where many wrestlers start to slow down, Booker is instantly recognizable to most fans that have even casually followed wrestling over the past 15 years. As a headliner or semi-main eventer, he has never been a big draw in and of himself. But that's not the role TNA needs him to fulfill. He is more valuable and marketable to TNA at this point than he was in WWE. **GRADE: B-**

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: Booker has always displayed a winning combination of technical prowess, brawling, and power. He may not be the best in any specific area, but the combination of the three assets has made him adaptable to opponents of any size or style. At his age, he's not adding many new moves to his arsenal, but he doesn't have to. He already has a lot of weapons at his disposal and the know-how that only comes with years of experience wrestling a Who's Who of opposition. **GRADE: A**

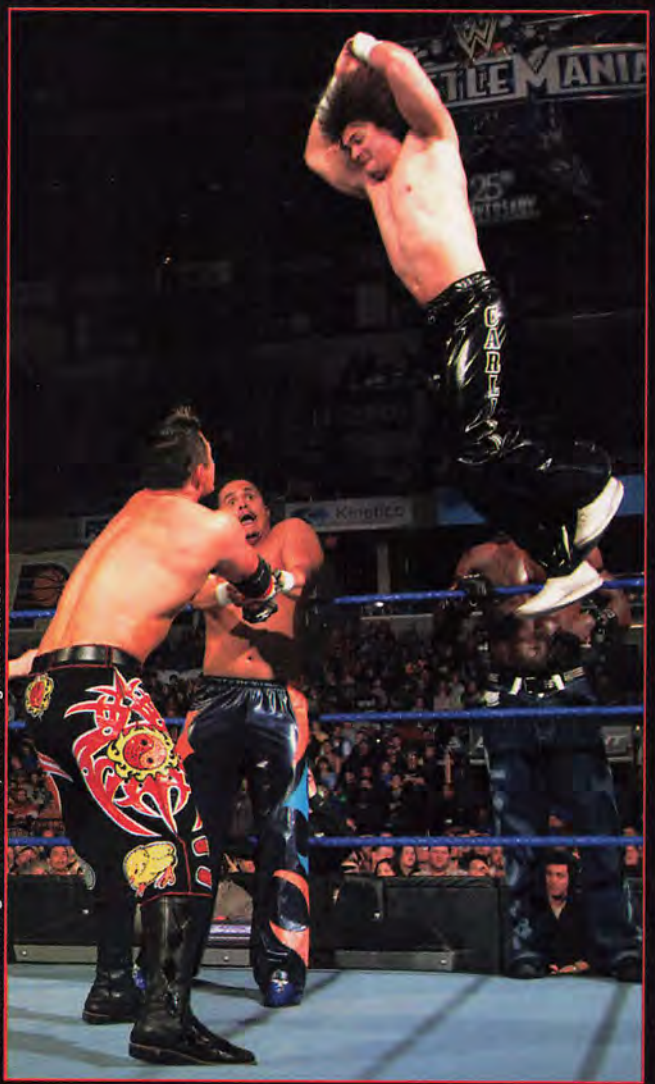
CAREER GROWTH: Booker is moving to the point where he's more interested in preserving his legacy than in achieving career growth per se. It's inevitable that youth will eventually be served, but Booker and his cohorts intend to delay it as long as possible. Booker always had the reputation of being a veteran performer who set an example of professionalism for younger wrestlers, whether he was wrestling as a fan favorite or heel. At present, however, Booker hears the footsteps of TNA's young fan favorites growing louder and louder. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Any time the words "Former World Champion" are attached to your name, you have value to a promotion. But that value is compromised when you attempt to stand in the way of progress. The Main Event Mafia members prefer tainted victories to even the most honorable of defeats. Is that the legacy Booker really wants to pass on? **GRADE: B-**



CARLITO & PRIMO COLON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The legendary Carlos Colon was best known for his success as a singles wrestler, but he also won 14 tag team championships during his storied career. Sons Carlos Jr. (better known as Carlito) and Eddie "Primo" Colon have proven the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Immediately after forming a team, the duo beat then-WWE tag team champions Curt Hawkins and Zack Ryder in a non-title match and then promptly won the rematch to claim the gold on Smackdown.



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While it's no secret that the tag team division of WWE has sometimes teetered on irrelevance in recent years, the Colon brothers' accomplishments as a team since their initial victory have nevertheless been rather impressive. **GRADE: A-**

MARKETABILITY: Older brother Carlito remains the team's focal point and mouthpiece. Much has been made over the years about the potential crossover marketability of Carlito, because of his natural charisma and his ability to cut promos in English or Spanish with equal ease. Carlito rode the apple-spitting act to relative fanfare earlier in his WWE career, but teaming with the quiet Primo hasn't yet led to widespread appeal, even among Latino fans. **GRADE: C+**

REPERTOIRE: The Colon boys take different approaches in the ring when competing as solo wrestlers. Carlito is more likely to attack from the ground and to try to take out an opponent's knees and back. Primo is the superior aerialist of the two. Together they have shown good chemistry. Primo has even adopted the Backstabber perfected by his brother. The Colons' repertoire is hardly revolutionary, but it's effective. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: As a recent graduate of the WWE's developmental program, Primo had more to gain from winning a tag team championship than did Carlito. However, Carlito's career in WWE has grown stagnant and teaming with Primo seems to have breathed some life back into his career. Long-term, there's little secret that Carlito's ambitions are as a solo wrestler—and his penchant for treachery still looms large in the eyes of fans. The brothers have the potential to feud at some point or to continue their successful pairing for as long as they see fit. A team with longevity is a rarity nowadays, but the Colons have the ability to mirror other great brother tandems. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: It is very hard for any tag team to become central players in WWE nowadays because even title matches are restricted to mid-card status. But the Colon brothers have revived some interest in the tag team scene ever since they united. The Latino fan demographic has become an increasingly important focus for WWE, and the Colon brothers bring instant name recognition among Spanish-speaking fans as well as reasonable popularity among fans in general. **GRADE: B-**

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CRYME TYME

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Sometimes it's difficult to figure out what Cryme Tyme's actual goals are. If JTG and Shad Gaspard aspire merely to entertain the fans with their zany antics and get a few laughs a week with their online show, Word Up, then they're doing a fine job. But, if they are truly intent on finally scoring some gold around their waists in what is a very shallow tag team talent pool in WWE, they've been way off the mark. Cryme Tyme has done well in singles and non-title matches against WWE World tag team champions John Morrison and The Miz, but when the titles have been on the line, they've fallen short every time. **GRADE: C+**

MARKETABILITY: JTG and Gaspard are young, good looking, well built (without being overly muscular), and hip. They ooze charisma and had established a strong connection with the audience before they even stepped into a WWE ring. In short, Cryme Tyme has all the marketability potential in the world. It hasn't been fully tapped yet, but the duo's merchandise sales already rank near the top of the list. Cryme Tyme has urban appeal, but combines it with a fun-loving sense of humor, a la John Cena. As such, they can cross over successfully to multiple demographics. The only concern is that Cryme Tyme's act will eventually wear thin, but we have yet to see their popularity even hint at taking a dive, regardless of middling success in the ring. **GRADE: A**

REPERTOIRE: Cryme Tyme's in-ring philosophy is time-tested and true: JTG plays the role of the smaller, quicker, occasionally high-flying striker, while Gaspard is the bigger power man. There are times, however, when they seem to get away from their game plan a bit, particularly with Gaspard trying to outfinesse opponents when he's alone in the ring. Cryme Tyme's finisher, the Drive By, is basically a standard double-team move, though we can't find fault with its effectiveness. Employing a wider array of tandem maneuvers might do Cryme Tyme well, if just to keep their opponents guessing. **GRADE: B**

Photo by George Napolitano

CAREER GROWTH: Despite Cryme Tyme's popularity, it is almost unfathomable that the duo has yet to win a title. Again, if exposure and merchandise sales are the name of the game, JTG and Shad have been a huge hit. But, for Cryme Tyme to truly be able to take their games to the next level, they need to cash in. Their in-ring success has been, frankly, quite stagnant since the team returned to WWE in March of 2008. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Putting their popularity and appeal aside, the one major thing Cryme Tyme has going for them is their youth. Even if they have underachieved in the ring thus far, they have plenty of time to improve. With the WWE's renewed focus on the unified tag team championship, Cryme Tyme could position itself as a major focal point of the company's present and future plans with just one big win. Even short of that, the teams remains one of the most popular entertainment acts in the game today. **GRADE: B-**

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JEFF HARDY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Armageddon 2008. A jubilant Jeff Hardy celebrated beneath the fireworks and confetti, basking in the adoration of the fans in Buffalo's HSBC Arena. It was a special moment as the "Rainbow-Haired Warrior" realized his childhood dream, finally winning the WWE championship. It was the start of a new era … or maybe not. Hardy's reign lasted barely a month. A feud with brother, Matt, did nothing but further sidetrack him from the championship. Hardy deserves credit for achieving his goal, but his was a championship reign ended too soon. **GRADE B-**

MARKETABILITY: There's a good reason Hardy has had so many title shots over the past few years—because the fans are still willing to pay to see him contend for the championship. Hardy has a massive fan base and is particularly popular with the ladies. He sells truckloads of T-shirts and merchandise and remains one of the most beloved competitors in the sport, even after a series of several high-profile mistakes in his personal life. Most wrestlers would kill for the kind of passionate fan support Hardy receives, seemingly without even seeking it. **GRADE: A+**

Photos by George Napolitano

REPERTOIRE: Hardy's offense is unconventional. He uses his own body as a weapon as opposed to utilizing many traditional moves. He flings himself at his opponents, both from a vertical base and from the top rope. It's a thrilling style, but it's dangerous and flawed. Hardy takes too many chances and relies on his guts to carry him through tight matches. He may not have the most conventional method of wrestling, but he can make something out of seemingly nothing—all while being in the air. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: The latter half of 2008 was all about Hardy's underdog pursuit of the WWE title. At Armageddon, Hardy delivered one of the feel-good stories of the year and won that elusive championship. The jealousy of his brother cost him the title, but Hardy's lack of focus has put the championship further out of reach than it has been in years. Just a few months removed from the Royal Rumble, Hardy has slipped completely out of title contention. His hunger for a world title kept him going for the past few years. Now that he has finally won that title, Hardy needs to stay hungry. A feud against his brother is a terrible mistake at this point in his career. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Hardy's pursuit of the championship was full of drama and excitement, but unfortunately it came to an all-too-soon ending. He has to begin to wonder if he has another title run just as short, will his massive fan base still be there? Almost certainly he would still have support, but it just wouldn't be the same. It's undeniable that Jeff Hardy gave us one of the greatest moments of 2008. His title win was the culmination of years of effort and fans' devotion. But, unless he can prove himself as a winner again (this time with a lengthy reign), it's hard to imagine Jeff as a full top-tier competitor. **GRADE: B-**

KOFI KINGSTON

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Talk about a dream start to a career. Kingston pulled off one of the most successful rookie years in WWE history, quickly asserted himself on ECW before being drafted to Raw, winning the Intercontinental title from Chris Jericho and enjoying a tag team championship reign with C.M. Punk. He was set to compete in the Raw "Elimination Chamber" match for the WWE World championship at No Way Out, but was attacked by Edge, who went on to take his place and ultimately win the title. Kingston, nonetheless, arrived with a bang, and has established himself as one of the most promising and popular young performers on the WWE roster. **GRADE: B+**

MARKETABILITY: Get ready to see a lot of Kofi Kingston merchandise and, eventually, a huge marketing push behind this guy, because he has all the tools and qualities of an emerging superstar. Kingston is smooth as silk in the ring, and just as colorful outside of it. He has charisma practically oozing out of his lean, chiseled physique, and boasts a warm, inviting personality to boot. Kingston has also shown promising mike skills, which, once properly cultivated, should help him further connect with the audience. **GRADE: B**

Photo by Matt Roberts

REPERTOIRE: Kingston is one of the more unique performers to come down the pike in some time. He comes at his opponents with a varied, unorthodox move set that combines high-flying acrobatics and martial arts-style strikes. His Trouble in Paradise spin kick has proven to be a lethal finisher, though he often puts himself in a vulnerable position when he fails to connect with it. The Boom-Boom Legdrop is goofy, in the same vein as the People's Elbow or The Worm, but we can't find fault in its effectiveness, or the fact that Kingston seems to feed off of the crowd's reaction to it. Overall, Kingston could use a bit more polish and might even want to slow down a bit at times. His fast, furious style has confounded many opponents, but it's only a matter of time before some of the more seasoned vets figure him out. He needs to find ways to keep them guessing. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: Basically coming out of nowhere to win two of the most prestigious championships in WWE, Kingston has certainly gained the wrestling world's attention. Now that he has it, it will be interesting to see what he can do with it, and whether or not he can avoid the dreaded sophomore slump. **GRADE: B+**

OVERALL VALUE: Kingston experienced so much success during his first year in WWE, but it all seemed to come together at once. He left ECW, won the I-C belt, lost it, won the World tag team title, and lost it. Outside of that two-month stretch, Kingston hasn't done much. He does not appear seasoned enough yet to compete for either of WWE's two major singles championships. While we heartily applaud what Kingston has accomplished so far, we can't help but wonder if his has been a case of too much, too soon. **GRADE: B-**

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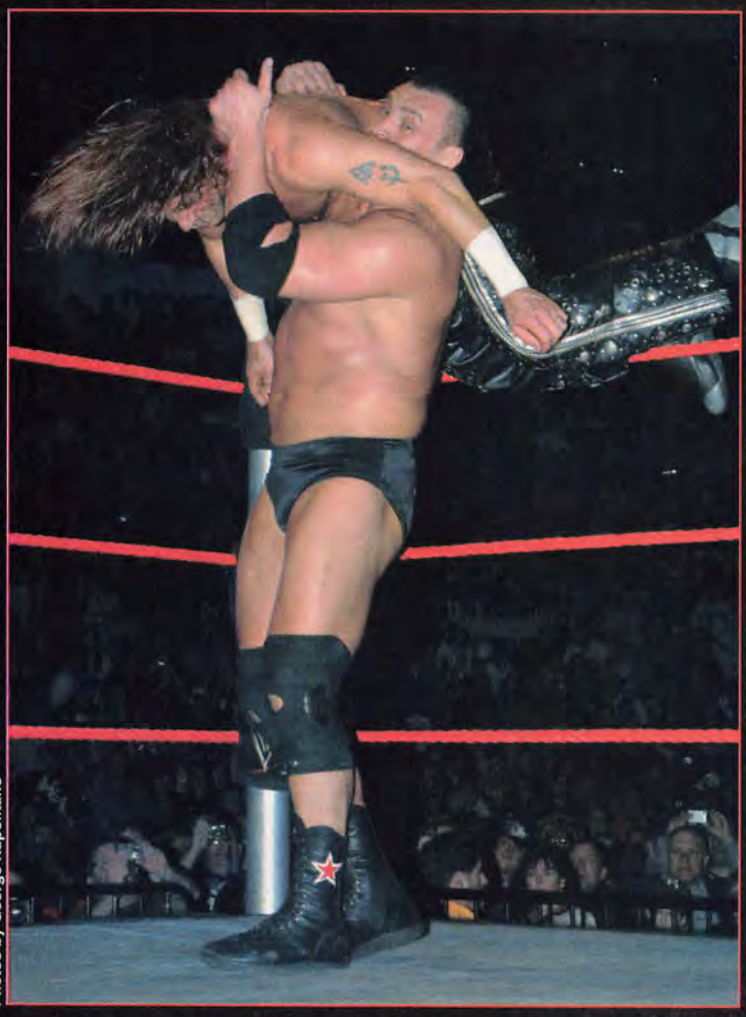
VLADIMIR KOZLOV

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The former OVW standout entered WWE with a lot of bluster and hype. He breezed through lesser competition, easily defeating a wide array of the federation's lower midcard talent. But once he started facing the "better competition" he demanded, Kozlov didn't fare so well. He failed in his "Elimination Chamber" match, got pinned on Raw by Shawn Michaels, and lost out on the opportunity to challenge The Undertaker's WrestleMania unbeaten streak. His overall record remains impressive, but his inability to win big matches means he'll have to get back in line. **GRADE: C+**



Photos by George Napolitano

MARKETABILITY: WWE has several options at its disposal for marketing Kozlov. The company could more heavily emphasize the fact that he's a former USA Open heavyweight Sambo champion and a United States Kick-Boxing Association International heavyweight grappling champion. It could stress the fact that he made numerous screen and stage acting performances apart from his fighting career. Or it could turn him into little more than a latter day version of Nikolai Volkoff or Ivan Koloff. Guess which route WWE Creative has chosen. **GRADE: C+**

REPERTOIRE: Kozlov is still unpolished when it comes to adapting his style to pro wrestling. His arsenal mostly consists of suplexes, kicks, slams, and chokes, and, of course, headbutts. While he has an extensive knowledge of submission holds, he has not been able to set up his top opponents to play into his strengths. However, it should also be kept in mind that Kozlov has only been in pro wrestling for four years. At age 36, he's playing catch-up but is such a skilled natural fighter that he figures to continue his improvement. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: Graduating from OVW to WWE was a big step for Kozlov, and he justified the signing by racking up an extensive winning streak on television. He has participated in a pay-per-view main event and headlined on Raw. As a result, his visibility has increased dramatically. But it remains to be seen if he can battle back into championship contention or if he fades into the midcard woodwork now that his pretensions of invulnerability have been shattered. **GRADE: A-**

OVERALL VALUE: Kozlov's sambo and grappling background make him an intriguing opponent for opponents of all sizes. Billed at 6'8" and more than 300 pounds, he has the size and strength to compete against the federation's super heavyweights. The question is whether he's charismatic enough to sustain the fans' long-term interest. His character doesn't spout Cold War rhetoric like his Russian heel predecessors, but Kozlov's cold-hearted automaton persona only has so much shelf life. That's especially true now that his winning streak is history. **GRADE: B-**

NECRO BUTCHER

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The danger-seeking, sadistic Necro Butcher has established himself as one of the most feared brawlers and well-respected performers on the independent circuit. No matter whether it's been CZW, ROH, Big Japan, Pro Wrestling Guerilla, or any other of the countless promotions he has been in, Butcher makes an impression. He even earned a prominent mention in a *Village Voice* article on Ring of Honor's Seventh Anniversary show. But has he peaked? Butcher's look and age (35) aren't particularly well-suited to either of the two big promotions and there's only so long he can continue his momentum in the independents. **GRADE: C**

Photos by Joe Zanolle

MARKETABILITY: By their very nature, independent promotions have limited marketing clout beyond the most diehard fans. The performers largely have the responsibility of marketing themselves. Necro Butcher has established the sort of cult following that few independent wrestlers enjoy, outside of a few wrestlers with experience in the big-name promotions. His appearance in the movie *The Wrestler* certainly helped his cause. But there's still room for improvement. Nowadays it's a virtual must for wrestlers to have an online presence. Butcher has had his own website, but it has been down for a while. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: Butcher will never be confused with Lou Thesz when it comes to technical proficiency, but he doesn't need an encyclopedic knowledge of holds and counter-maneuvers. He also lacks overwhelming power, but once again, it is not a necessity for his success. Rather, Butcher is an intense brawler who specializes in violent matches. As long as the match involves weapons or other special stipulations, Butcher has the upper hand. Since death matches are his established niche in the business, it's unfair to expect Butcher to deviate much from his brawling hardcore style. By the same token, a little more diversity on the technical end couldn't hurt. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: Butcher has gone about as far as he can go within the U.S. independents and smaller Japanese promotions. He's risen to the point where he has enough name recognition to be high on the card of any independent show he wrestles. But even if he were to make his way to one of the big promotions, his upside at the top level is strictly mid-card. **GRADE: B**

OVERALL VALUE: Butcher's matches are the type that have typically convinced fans of independent wrestling to drive out to shows located a fair distance from their hometowns. He's not a breakout star like pre-TNA Samoa Joe, but he rarely fails to entertain. **GRADE: B-**

NECROPHAGIA

ALEX SHELLEY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: After nearly two full years of chasing the TNA World tag team title with his Motor City Machine Guns partner Chris Sabin, Shelley finally would see his luck turn around. In early-January, the Machine Guns defeated Yujiro and Tetsua Naito in Tokyo to claim the IWPG junior heavyweight tag team championship. One week later, at TNA's Genesis PPV, Shelley pinned Sabin in an tournament final to capture the X division title, kick-starting his first major singles reign. Shelley would drop the strap two months later to Suicide in a five-way Ultimate X match at Destination X, but not before taking another huge step forward in his career. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: While coming up through the ranks in Border City Wrestling and Ring of Honor, Shelley always made an impression with his brash, cocky, and sometimes downright arrogant attitude. He displayed a similar demeanor upon his debut in TNA in 2004, but gradually seemed to lose his edge. Over the past year, Shelley began to loosen up and allow his personality to shine through once again. Not only did this coincide with his most successful stretch in TNA to date, it endeared him more to the fans. Shelley has long drawn comparisons to the "Y2J" version of Chris Jericho for his ability to cut into his opponents in a scathing, yet humorously witty fashion. There aren't many in TNA his age (25) that can match his combination of in-ring ability and mike skill, nor the grassroots following he and Sabin continue to generate. **GRADE: B-**

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: It's always interesting to watch how veterans and newcomers adapt to TNA's six-sided ring. Shelley may go down as one of the first to actually develop his offense within its unique confines. He probably couldn't have picked a better finisher than Sliced Bread, which can be hit from almost any angle thanks to the configuration of the ring. The move can be countered in a variety of ways, but to Shelley's credit, he has developed several additional counters and reversals to offset this. Whether in singles or tag team action with Sabin, Shelley always keeps opponents guessing with a combo of chain wrestling and rope-running tactics, and is also willing to break the rules when necessary. **GRADE: A-**

CAREER GROWTH: The inability to break through and capture the TNA tag team title continues to haunt the Motor City Machine Gun, even if, technically, the IWGP Junior straps hold as much or more prestige on a worldwide scale. Winning the X division title was a big step forward for Shelley, though the brevity of his reign put a bit of a damper on that accomplishment. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Shelley is unquestionably one of the top young guns (pun intended) in TNA and should be a major focus of the company's plans moving forward. He possesses outstanding in-ring ability and presence, and is equally adept in a singles or tag team role. While his smallish stature was once considered to be a hindrance, that has not been as much of a concern since the similarly sized A.J. Styles shattered the myth that cruiserweights couldn't rise to main event status in TNA. In short, Shelley has all the tools and potential in the world, but simply has yet to realize it. **GRADE: B-**

ABYSS

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The former NWA/TNA World champion earned a reputation as an ultraviolent monster over the course of his first several years in TNA. Since turning fan favorite, his scary intensity has been toned down almost to the point of being extinguished. Abyss has sometimes become more of a comedic presence than someone who elicits fear. He's not quite Norman the Lunatic of WCW infamy, but he's moved in that direction. Matt Morgan's violent turn on his former tag team partner has brought out more of the old Abyss, but once their feud runs its course, Abyss' status is uncertain. It won't help him get back in world title contention. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: When he was in the thick of the NWA/TNA World championship picture, Abyss was promoted as though he were TNA's answer to vintage Kane and Mick Foley, although "The Monster" never approached the sort of aura the masked Kane or charisma Mankind-era Foley emanated. Abyss' turn to fan favorite initially raised hopes that the threat of him snapping at any moment could make him a more marketable character. Instead, there's a derivative "been-there-done-that" quality to the marketing efforts involving his character. To be marketable, Abyss must be invulnerable—not a well-meaning bumbler who misplaces his trust in people like Matt Morgan. **GRADE: C+**

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: Abyss' repertoire will always be based on power moves, brawling, and leverage. His Black Hole Slam usually seals the match and his signature setup moves—chokeslams, torture racks, backbreakers, and spears—are made more effective by his massive size and force. He's average at best on the technical side. The biggest issue with Abyss is that his main repertoire hasn't evolved much and he's unlikely to add many new maneuvers in the immediate future. Everyone he wrestles has a book on him. Abyss is still plenty dangerous when he's on the offensive and is hard to take down legally. But his predictability is hurting him in the ring. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: By the time Abyss found himself partnering with Morgan in a tag team—in and of itself a sign of a career in flux—his momentum was stalled. They were out of sync as a unit, looking like two singles wrestlers rather than a cohesive unit. Their subsequent falling out and feud has given Abyss a new distraction, but not much in the way of career advancement. **GRADE: C+**

OVERALL VALUE: Abyss has become a TNA mainstay over the last several years. That's a mixed blessing. On the one hand, as a former World champion, even his mid-card matches have a certain credibility. On the other hand, it's hard to keep a character like Abyss fresh and interesting. Even The Undertaker has had distinct eras of his career, and Abyss is no 'Taker. Right now he's foundering, and TNA is struggling to keep him relevant enough to be used in future headline matches either on *Impact* or pay-per-views. He's become less of a threat to cut a path of destruction to the TNA World title, and that also makes him less valuable to the promotion. It's not a hopeless situation, but it's not ideal. **GRADE: C+**

C03679

SHELTON BENJAMIN

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Shelton Benjamin may call himself the "Gold Standard," but silver seems to be more of his specialty. Benjamin spent about eight months as the U.S. champion, holding the secondary singles championship of the Smackdown brand. That seems like an incredible accomplishment, until you look a bit more carefully at the record book. During that reign, Benjamin suffered several non-title losses. He barely defended the title on pay-per-view. In fact, during his reign, the U.S. title was virtually invisible. That's not all Benjamin's fault, of course, but the so-called "Gold Standard" produced one of the most lackluster and meaningless reigns in the history of the U.S. title. **GRADE: C+**

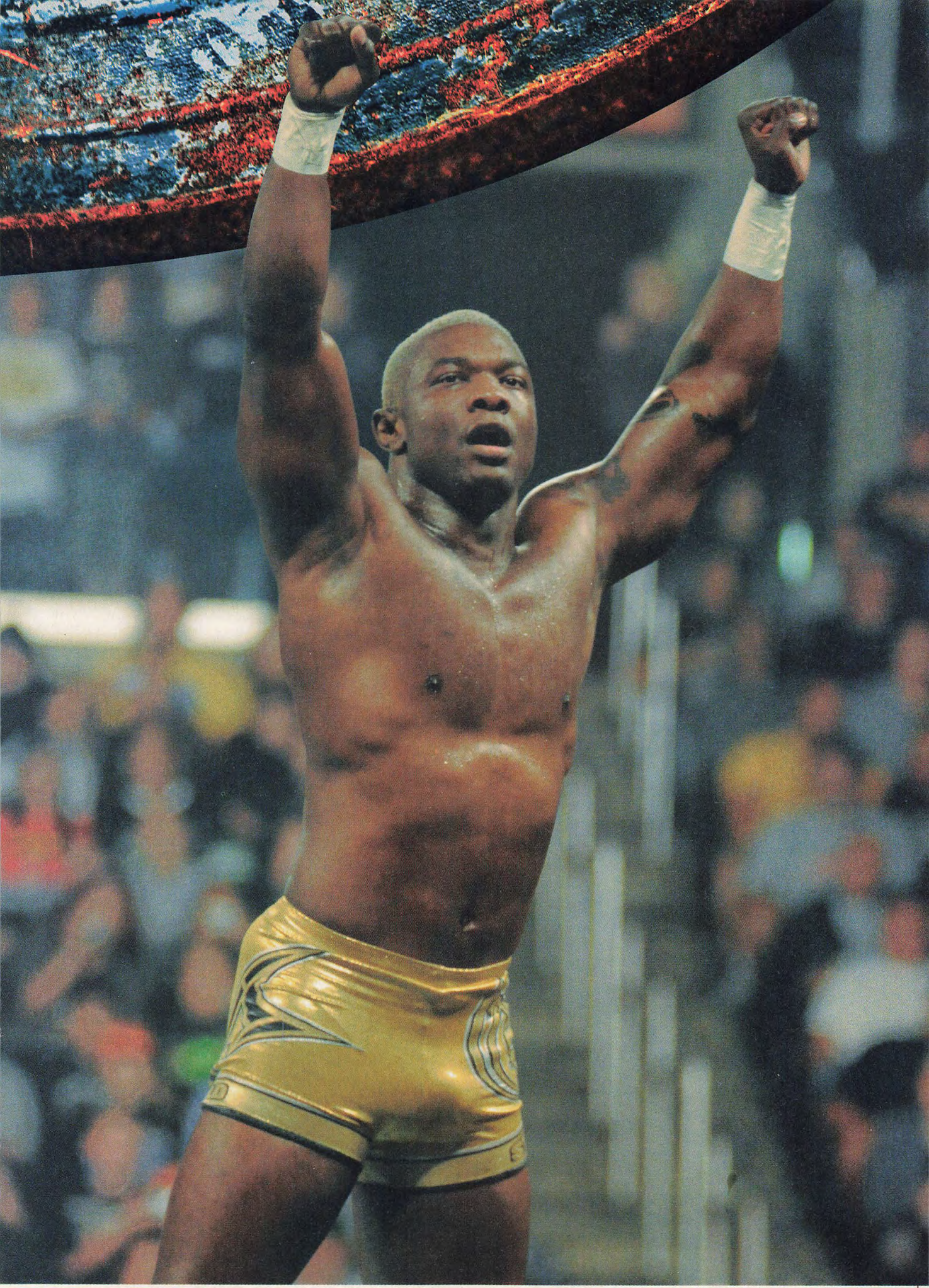
Photos by George Napolitano

MARKETABILITY: Through the years, WWE Creative has tried just about everything it could do to build up Benjamin's Q Score. They paired him with Kurt Angle, billed him as one-half of the "World's Greatest Tag Team," introduced us to his momma, and sent him to Butch "The Natural" Reed's barber for a makeover. None of it has worked. Benjamin is a terrific amateur wrestler and a phenomenal athlete, but he still seems out of place in the pro wrestling world. **GRADE: D**

REPERTOIRE: Marketability issues aside, Benjamin is one of the most underrated competitors in the world. He is a superior mat wrestler and a superb aerialist. The problem is he seems to feel that he has to brawl to get noticed. He'll showcase his quick takedowns and mat exchanges, then resort to basic punches and kicks. Or he'll opt for a showy countermove instead of a more conventional, and practical, reverse. When he throws a lazy kick that gets caught, he will frequently try to spin around and throw a reverse kick to escape. It's acrobatic and impressive, but easily evaded, and tends to land Benjamin squarely on his face. He needs to understand that he is a wrestler first and foremost and embrace that. If he can forget the lousy gimmicks and simply do what he does best, his career may take off. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Losing the U.S. title to MVP may have been the best thing to happen to him. The title was holding him back. It's about time for Benjamin to contend for a world championship or to jump to Raw and see what the new scenery can do for him. He is growing stale on Smackdown. He's at a crossroads in his career. If he makes the right move, he can finally get to the next level, but that window is closing quickly. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: C+, D, A, B- … Benjamin's grades are all over the board. And his overall value is difficult to determine. A few years back, he wrestled Shawn Michaels in a match on Raw that could have been a Match of the Year contender. In the right match against the right opponent, Benjamin can deliver the goods. He just rarely gets those opportunities, and without those opportunities, he's just another upper-midcard guy killing time before the main event. **GRADE: C+**



MARK HENRY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It took him 12 years to do it, but Henry finally shed the label of career underachiever when he captured the ECW championship in a three-way match against Kane and The Big Show last June. "The World's Strongest Man" was one of the big winners of the post-WrestleMania draft in 2008, finding nothing but success in ECW after a decent, but largely uneventful run on Smackdown. Henry went on to hold the title for the duration of the summer, introducing Hall of Famer Tony Atlas as his new manager along the way. Ultimately, Matt Hardy took the strap from Henry by surviving a five-person scramble match at Unforgiven, without Henry ever having been beaten in the match. Henry has continued to rack up wins since. But after failing in rematch attempts, Henry seems to have gotten lost in the shuffle again. **GRADE: B**

Photos by George Napolitano

MARKETABILITY: Henry plays the role of foil very well; As such, while he remains a dominant force and the resident "super heavyweight" on ECW, he is not someone who WWE is ever going to put a large marketing push behind. The presence of Atlas at ringside during his matches does add a touch of nostalgia, which longtime fans may enjoy. But, otherwise, Henry simply does not possess any notable level of "mainstream" appeal. **GRADE: D**

REPERTOIRE: As Henry's nickname suggests, strength is his name and power is his game. He is generally limited in his move set, as he relies on fundamental-but-effective "big man" maneuvers such as his old standby, the bear hug. The "World's Strongest Slam" may not be flashy, but it is as effective a finisher as there is in wrestling today. The sheer force with which Henry delivers it virtually ensures a pinfall victory, and we have yet to see the move countered. Getting to the point where he can sufficiently weaken his opponent enough to apply the hold, however, is often the problem. In many cases, Henry tries to rush things and put opponents away early, knowing that the longer a given match goes, the more likely he is to run out of gas. This tends to lead to hasty mistakes, and has cost him several important matches. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: It must have been satisfying for Henry to finally silence his critics (if briefly) when he won the ECW title. The only championship he had ever held previously in WWE was the European title, which was merely presented to him by then-champion Jeff Jarrett way back in 1999. Still, Henry's ECW reign seemed to end just as he was hitting his stride, and he was unable to follow it up with any degree of further success. With Swagger positioned as the top rulebreaker on ECW and a host of young, up-and-coming challengers such as Evan Bourne and Tyson Kidd waiting in the wings, Henry has lost his spot as one of the brand's top contenders. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: One of the WWE's longest-tenured performers, Henry has done well in re-inventing himself several times over and made a very shrewd decision in hiring Atlas as his manager. He's smarter than generally given credit for, but can he figure out yet another way to climb back up the ladder and challenge for the ECW title? More than likely, 2008 was a career year for Henry, and he'll be hard pressed to ever duplicate that level of success again. **GRADE: C+**

MIKE KNOX

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The image of Knox as Kelly Kelly's jealous, short-haired, short-bearded, underachieving boyfriend from a few years back is all but a distant memory. And that, in a nutshell, is probably the biggest compliment we can bestow upon the "Monstrous" one. Knox has yet to win a title in WWE and still has a ways to go before fully establishing himself as a credible threat to any of the regular main event players. But he has managed to completely re-invent himself by bringing out his inner beast, and showed some savvy by instigating a feud with Rey Mysterio Jr. through a series of seemingly random attacks. Knox ultimately came up on the short end of that rivalry, but unmistakably became a force to be reckoned with on Raw in the process. **GRADE: B-**

MARKETABILITY: Knox has been, unfairly, likened to a young Bruiser Brody by many, including announcer Jim Ross. While it would be difficult for him to live up to that billing, it is important to note that the mere comparison does go beyond his grizzly look. Knox seems to be evolving before our eyes. Where once critics saw a one-dimensional power brawler with little personality, he is beginning to get credit for displaying gradual improvement in that area. The more we learn about Knox and his motives, it seems, the more intriguing he becomes. He remains something of an enigma, for the most part, but could be a dark horse candidate for a more prominent role if he continues progressing as he has. **GRADE: C**

Photos by George Napolitano

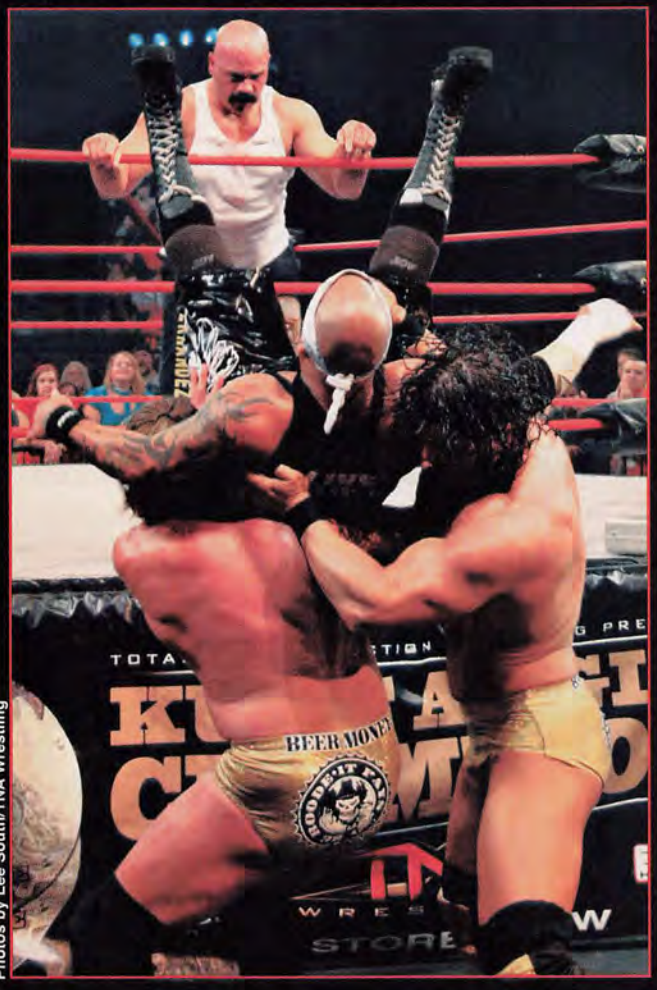
REPERTOIRE: What makes Knox so dangerous is not merely the viciousness with which he attacks his opponents, but his speed. For a man his size, he possesses remarkable quickness, though not necessarily agility. His running big boot and Knox-Out finisher are maneuvers we've seen from other big men for years, but his versions seem to have an added snap to them that makes them more effective. Knox could definitely stand to add to his move set, as he often becomes predictable as his matches wear on. His high-impact offense has helped him finish many bouts against lesser opponents quickly. But, when he's out there for any length of time, his limitations tend to be exposed. **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: The jump from ECW to Raw, where Knox immediately joined Kane as one of the brand's resident "monsters," has done wonders for his career. Knox's biggest single accomplishment was qualifying for the six-man "Elimination Chamber" match for the WWE championship at No Way Out. Participating in a PPV main event, albeit a multi-man match, was something few would have predicted just months ago. Knox seems to have lost some direction since his feud with Mysterio ended, and could really benefit from finding a new rival. He was left off the WrestleMania 25 card after being pinning by Kane in a three-way "Money In The Bank" qualifier on Raw that also included Mysterio. **GRADE: B**

OVERAL L VALUE: Knox really seemed to be on the verge of breaking out just prior to No Way Out, but couldn't follow up his strong performance in the "Elimination Chamber" with anything more notable than a quick win on Raw over Jamie Noble. He's become a somewhat forgotten man since then and needs to find a way to get back on track. Might we suggest he challenge the very man that knocked him out of WrestleMania, Kane? **GRADE: C+**

LATIN AMERICAN XCHANGE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Hernandez' TNA World title shot against Sting is a perfect example of the difficulties that plague the Latin American Xchange. At Final Resolution, Hernandez and Homicide came away with a World and an X division title shot, respectively. As one of the top teams in the company and in possession of two guaranteed championship matches, you would expect to be sitting comfortably on top of TNA. Instead, Hernandez rushed his title shot and beat Sting by DQ in a forgettable match on *Impact* (he was granted a rematch due to the interference of the Main Event Mafia, however). LAX always seems to jump the gun and leap before they look. They accept matches without thinking of long-term consequences, both of wins and of losses. In short, they don't seem to have any kind of game plan at all. Losing Hector Guerrero as their manager was a huge blow. They are in dire need of veteran guidance. **GRADE: C**



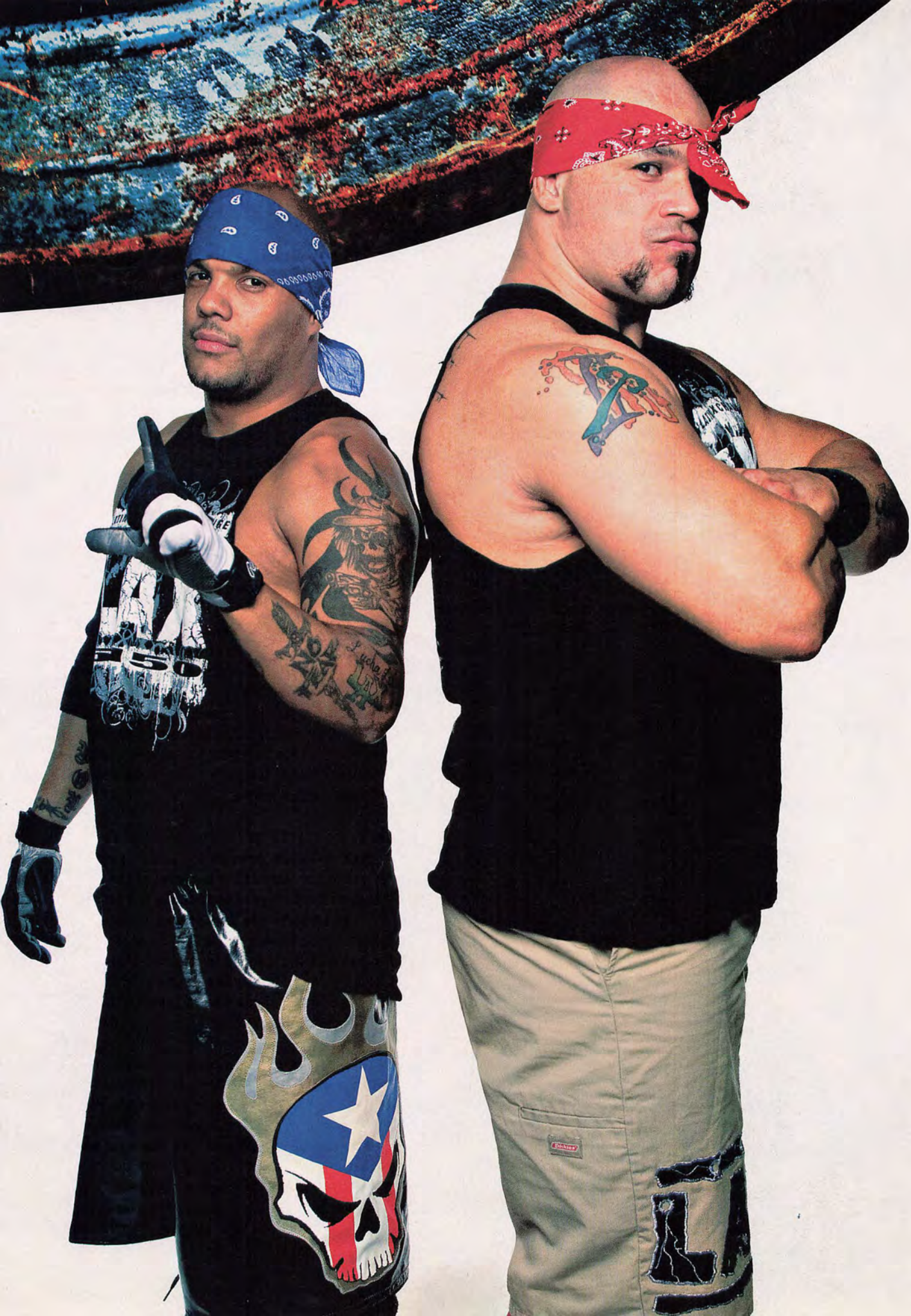
Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

MARKETABILITY: When your promotion runs most of its shows in Florida, you'd better believe that a Latino tag team is going to have huge support. LAX is one of the most popular acts on the TNA roster. Even though they sell loads of merchandise, they've managed to keep their street cred. The fans know both men are capable of more than we have seen so far, and everyone is waiting for them to finally get their moment to truly shine. **GRADE: B+**

REPERTOIRE: Homicide spent years in Ring of Honor facing the likes of Bryan Danielson, A.J. Styles, and Christopher Daniels. He may also be one of the fastest grapplers we have ever seen. The way he pivots his weight or opens space between himself and an opponent to reverse a hold is unequalled. Sometimes, you have to watch him in slow-motion just to notice the fluidity and nuances of his counters, escapes, and transitions. Hernandez complements him nicely as the overpowering big man who can come in on a hot tag and clean house. They could use a little bit more teamwork and double-team moves, however. Sometimes they look like two men wrestling different matches instead of a team. **GRADE: B+**

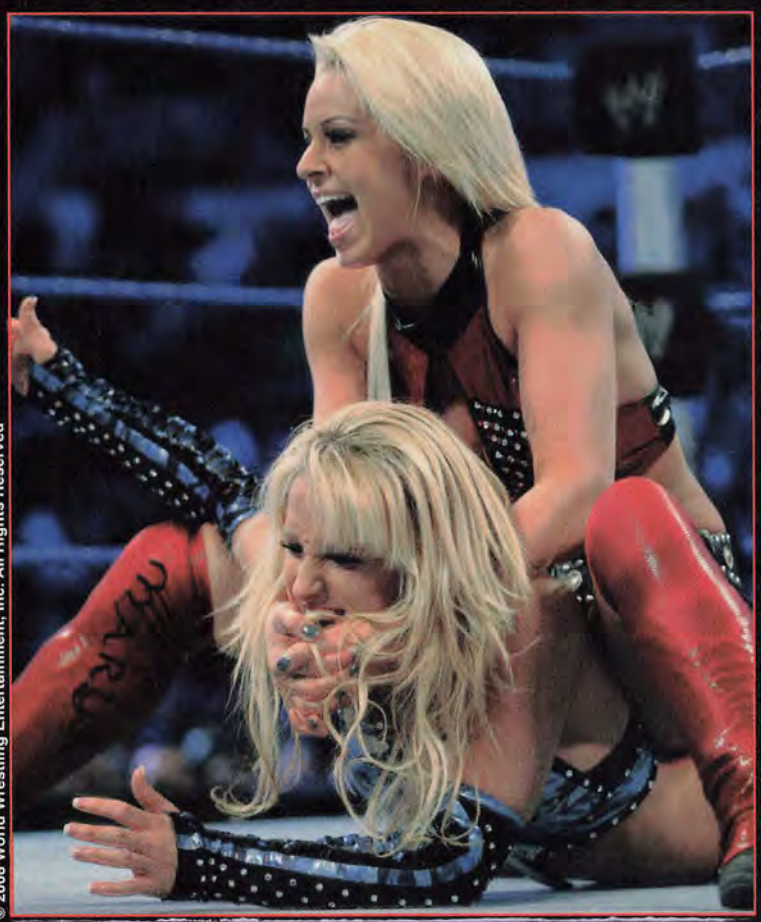
CAREER GROWTH: LAX won the TNA tag title in May 2008 and held that championship through August. They lost several matches to Beer Money Inc., then somewhat faded away. They never made much of a stand against the Main Event Mafia. They never got locked up in another big feud. They won briefcases in "Feast Or Fired," but other than that, they spent a good part of the past several months floating. **GRADE: C-**

OVERALL VALUE: LAX is haunted by its own potential. They have been compared to The Hart Foundation. Some people say Hernandez is the company's next breakout star. Homicide could help take the X division to new heights. But, even with all those whispers, nothing seems to happen. LAX is exactly where they were six months ago, and Team 3-D and Beer Money Inc. are feuding for the tag title. **GRADE: C+**



MARYSE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The French-Canadian glamour model took advantage of the falling-out between Michelle McCool and Maria Kanellis to capture the WWE Divas championship. The upset victory came on the heels of several unsuccessful challenges to McCool. Shortly after winning the belt, Maryse suffered a knee injury. She has subsequently returned to the ring. Maryse has shown herself to be surprisingly capable in the ring in light of the fact she has been wrestling for less than three years and lacked wrestling experience prior to beginning wrestling training in 2006. Her karate training is of limited use in the WWE. Winning the Divas title was an impressive accomplishment, but the upgrade in talent in the women's division could make it hard for Maryse to sustain her success. **GRADE: B-**



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MARKETABILITY: The fact that English is a second language to Maryse limits some of her marketability to WWE. But make no mistake about it—the former Hawaiian Tropic and *Playboy* model isn't a top Diva because of her ability to cut promos in English. The question is whether she's just another blonde bombshell looking to use the WWE as a steppingstone or wants to stay in the business for the long haul. There has been little difference in her marketability whether she's wrestling as a heel or a fan favorite. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: Maryse has a black belt in karate, and most of her wrestling repertoire focuses on her opponents' back and legs. She's earned quite a few pinfall wins with her French Kiss DDT but still has a lot of learning to do in the ring. Weighing just 125 pounds, she stays in tremendous physical condition but is at a disadvantage against some of the federation's more thickly muscled competitors. Despite capturing the Divas title, her repertoire does not yet match up to opponents with more experience. But to Maryse's credit, she's shown herself to be a quick learner. **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: Within the span of two years, Maryse rocketed through the WWE development system to compete at the top level of the women's roster. Has the 26-year-old peaked too soon? It remains to be seen. She's had some minor injury issues, but has shown resilience. As of this writing, she had just started an inter-promotional feud with women's champion Melina. If she gets the best of that feud, look for Maryse to take on Divas from both brands. **GRADE: C+**

OVERALL VALUE: Maryse could not have won the Divas championship at a better time. With WWE adding depth and talent to its women's roster, Maryse's title win will keep her in the mix for a while to come. She is likely to suffer some setbacks along the way, but she seems committed to fitting in with the PG image WWE is seeking for its programming. She's trying to be a wrestler, not just another pretty face, and she deserves some credit for that. **GRADE: C+**

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June 1987: Nikita Koloff's Mission: Saddle The Horsemen And Trample Lex Luger! Also: Roddy Piper, Adams & Taylor, Bruiser Brody, Scott Hall.

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Oct. 1987: The Rock 'n' Roll Express Win Their Fourth NWA Title. Also: Hogan-Bigelow, Rhodes-Blanchard, scaffold, Kevin Sullivan.

Nov. 1987: Special Fan Poll: Should Mr. T Be Allowed To Referee? Also: War Games, Bulldogs, Condrey & Rose, Dusty Rhodes.

Dec. 1987: Rhodes Challenges Luger: Will Dusty's U.S. Title Hopes Split The Superpowers? Also: Hayes-Bubba, Magnum T.A., Randy Savage, Al Perez.

Jan. 1988: Is Hulk Hogan Bored With The WWF Title? Also: R&Rs-Horsemen, Flair-R. Garvin, Adrian Adonis, Steve Williams.

Feb. 1988: A Special Analysis By Jesse Ventura: Randy Savage Has Wimped Out! Also: Sting, R&Rs-Blanchard & Anderson, Kevin Von Erich, Dangerously-Lawler-Dundee.

March 1988: Bam Bam Bigelow: Wrestling's Most Dangerous Man. Also: Adams-Perez, Nikita Koloff, Honky Tonk, Freebirds.

May 1988: Million-Dollar Middleman: The Future Of The WWF Is In Ted DiBiase's Hands. Also: Zbyszko & Baby Doll, Road Warriors-Konga & Warlord, Fritz Von Erich, Rockers-Express.

June 1988: The Noble Savage: How Beauty Killed The Beast Within "The Macho Man." Also: Warriors-Warlord & Barbarian, R&R Express, Baby Doll, G. Gagne-Hennig.

July 1988: A Toast To Wrestling's Odd Couple: Kerry Von Erich & Michael Hayes Unite! Also: DiBiase-Savage-Hogan, Dillon & Horsemen, Sting, Rick Steamboat.

Aug. 1988: What Randy Savage Must Do To Escape The Shadow Of Hulk Hogan. Also: Hyatt-Gilbert, Sting, Michael Hayes, Honky Tonk.

Oct. 1988: Preview & Analysis: Megapowers vs. Megabucks. Also: Horsemen, Jerry Lawler, Warlord & Barbarian, Dangerously-Gilbert, Beefcake-Honky Tonk.

Nov. 1988: Dusty Rhodes vs. Barry Windham: The Night The Teacher Learned A Lesson. Also: Kerry-Lawler, Lex Luger, Muraco-Valentine, Freebirds.

Dec. 1988: Exclusive "Hotseat" Interview: Roddy Piper—Will He Ever Be Back? Also: Powers of Pain, Ultimate Warrior, Ric Flair, Bambi-Mystic, Kevin Von Erich.

Feb. 1989: Tully & Arn Will Fail Under Bobby Heenan! A Special Analysis By J.J. Dillon. Also: Hogan-Bossman, Sgt. Slaughter, Lawler-INSIDE WRESTLING, Davis-Wayne.

Aug. 1989: Your Ballots Are In: Hulkamania Rules! Also: Tanaka & Diamond, Rick Steamboat, Bigelow-Rhodes, Rick Rude, Jim Cornette.

Sept. 1989: Savage Is Shamed By Hogan—Only Elizabeth Can Save Him Now. Also: Lex Luger, Mil Mascaras, Dusty Rhodes, Bushwhackers, Skandor Akbar.

Oct. 1989: Dusty Rhodes' WWF Hit List. Also: Hall-Pillman-Vicious, Curt Hennig, Warriors, Terry Gordy, Kevin Von Erich.

Dec. 1989: The Dusty Road Is Paved With Gold: The American Dream Lives On! Also: Ric Flair, Hogan-Zeus, Embry-Chu-hi, Lex Luger, Larry Zbyszko.

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June 1991: Steiners, LOD: Tag Team Thunder. Also: Steve Williams, Nikita Koloff, I-C belt, Dundees, Arn Anderson.

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WILLIAM REGAL

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It's fitting that William Regal's native Blackpool is considered to be the roller-coaster capital of England, because his career has seen some incredible ups and downs of late. Within the past year, Regal rose back to prominence, winning his first King of the Ring tournament and second Intercontinental title. But both accomplishments were somewhat hollow—Regal created an easy path for himself to the KOTR crown by virtue of his role as Raw GM, and his I-C victory came against the weakest champion in recent memory, Santino Marella. And both were short-lived. Regal's tenure at the helm of Raw and KOTR reign came to an end thanks to an untimely Wellness Policy suspension. He lost the I-C title to C.M. Punk after only two successful television defenses (a win and a loss, both by DQ). He has been floating rather aimlessly since. **GRADE: C**

Photo by George Napolitano

MARKETABILITY: Regal is something of a rarity, as he is cut from the mold of the old school guard. His personality is as cold as his mean streak is vicious, but you won't find a lot of sizzle here. His snooty blueblood demeanor can be downright hilarious, but it hasn't boosted his profile in the mainstream. Nor will you ever see an audience full of William Regal T-shirts or signs, even in his native England, where he remains a very popular performer. Stateside, he is what he is: a hardened veteran and perennial stalwart of the mid-card. The addition of Layla El as his valet has added nothing to his success, but, we suppose, does make watching his matches a bit more appealing to the male demographic. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: Hold-for-hold, there are few better, as Regal possesses a wide array of locks, holds, and submissions. The implementation of a running knee strike to his arsenal was a smart idea. The move is relatively easy to hit on a stunned opponent and is the perfect complimentary finisher to Regal's aggressive nature. We'd like to see him use his devastating Regal-plex more; it seems he is often reluctant to break it out in big matches, for whatever reason. While Regal's offense remains as varied and effective as ever, his defensive strategy leaves a lot to be desired. His oft-sluggish movements in the ring leave him wide open to attacks by quicker opponents such as C.M. Punk or high-flying cruiserweights such as Rey Mysterio Jr. That Regal seems to have more difficulty with smaller rivals says a lot about the flaws in his game. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: The KOTR and I-C title wins look good as additions to Regal's long list of accomplishments, but both ended in disaster. At this stage of his career, Regal's one and only goal should be contending for a world title, the one thing that has consistently eluded his grasp. The Wellness fiasco and his short program against Punk over the I-C strap (after promising a "rivalry for the ages") have, frankly, stunted Regal's progression. Again. **GRADE: D**

OVERALL VALUE: Solid, sound performers like Regal are valuable commodities in any promotion. Yet, while he can always be counted upon to put on a good match against any opponent, one has to wonder whether Regal blew his final chance to be a main event player. **GRADE: C+**

Photo by Shane M. Kidder

SAMOA JOE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: At Lockdown 2008, Samoa Joe finally fulfilled his potential and claimed the top prize in TNA with a win over Kurt Angle. Joe was the King of the Mountain (a title he won at Slammiversary) for six months before dropping the strap to Sting at Bound for Glory. There's no shame in losing a title to Sting, particularly under dubious circumstances (though it seems that nearly all TNA World title matches involve some sort of dubious circumstances). What's disturbing is how Joe has behaved since losing the title. He sulked, lost matches to beatable opponents (including Kevin Nash), and allowed Rhino and A.J. Styles to surpass him as the faces of the Frontline. Now he's unleashed a so-called "Nation Of Violence" and is running around getting himself disqualified and threatening people with a knife. A knife. There's no place for that kind of behavior in wrestling. **GRADE: C**

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

MARKETABILITY: Prior to this whole "Nation Of Violence" thing, Joe was one of the most marketable competitors in TNA. He fought with a physical style and forced opponents to respect him. He conducted himself like a warrior and people responded with their cheers and adulation. In his new incarnation, Joe is just a thug, and fan reaction to him has cooled markedly. It must be hard for TNA brass to hold up Joe as the face of the company when he's threatening to slit people's throats on national television. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: "The Samoan Submission Machine" is one of the most well-rounded competitors you will find anywhere. How many other wrestlers could have competed with Angle in a UFC-style contest the way Joe did at Lockdown? He is one of the best strikers in the sport and is deceptively agile—just ask anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of one of his suicide dives. Simply put, he is too good to allow himself to become a garbage wrestler, which is what he seems to be devolving into with his latest persona. **GRADE: A**

CAREER GROWTH: Joe has taken a colossal step backward since losing the title. Maybe, just maybe, his new aggressive streak will push him back to world title contention and get him back where he needs to be, but his new violence seems unfocused. How will terrorizing Scott Steiner and Sheik Abdul Bashir get him any closer to Sting's title? If he's giving up his spot as heir apparent of TNA in favor of becoming a hackneyed impression of Bruiser Brody, he's making a terrible mistake. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: It may seem like we're being hard on Joe, but every teacher is harder on the students who underachieve and squander talent. Last year, headed into Lockdown, we gave Joe a B+ in overall value. His stock has fallen considerably since then. He needs to get his head together soon. **GRADE: C+**

THE BIG SHOW

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Just six months ago, could anyone have predicted that the self-professed "Largest Athlete In The World" would be competing for the WWE World title in a featured bout at WrestleMania? Show is one of the most erratic competitors in wrestling history. When his head is in the game, he's virtually unbeatable. When his head isn't in the game, he's getting beaten up by 147-pound Floyd Mayweather Jr. Show was smart to become an enforcer for Edge. That move put him in line for a title shot that, frankly, he didn't deserve. In the past, Show has always bullied his way to the top. This time, he used some savvy, some subterfuge, and even a little romance. In any case, he made it to a title match at 'Mania, and that has to count for something. **GRADE: B+**

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MARKETABILITY: The Big Show is a giant paradox: When he's competing at his best in the ring, his marketing value is at its lowest. There are a lot of wrestling fans that are tired of the plodding man-monster. We've seen Show play the role of Goliath and we've seen a dozen Davids slay him. It got old years ago. Show is at his most marketable when he's not taking himself too seriously. He has great comic timing and a bigger-than-life presence. He can be funny, charismatic, and even charming. It's just a shame that we see so little of that side of him anymore. **GRADE: C+**

REPERTOIRE: Show made a smart move a couple of years ago and began studying boxing. He developed a tremendous knockout punch and that made him an even more dangerous competitor. The problem is that punching power is just one component of a boxer's game. Show's ever expanding and contracting waistline has been in expand mode for a while now. He has no footwork and limited mobility. All the knockout power in the world does you no good if you telegraph your kayo punch because you're gassed or because you lack the ability feint and jab. Maybe it's about time for him to break out the jump rope. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: The Big Show has been in WWE for about 10 years now and it seems he's always been in just about the same position. He's a big powerful guy who contends for the title to make things interesting, then vanishes for a while before doing it all again. It's like *Groundhog Day* minus the humor and fun. **GRADE: C**

OVERALL VALUE: Show has a role as the big freak show enforcer-type. He can face any enormous newcomer and make it a compelling match. Put him in there against Umaga, Ezekiel Jackson, or The Great Khali and you can have an intriguing (if not particularly fast-paced) match. But in 2009, Show has no business competing against John Cena and Edge. When he retired a few years back, it's not like people were clamoring for him to come back. He can fill a niche, but the big man is best in smaller portions. **GRADE: C**

Photo by George Napolitano

MATT HARDY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: A few years ago, a furious Matt Hardy returned to WWE to feud with Edge, the man who stole away his real-life girlfriend. The Hardy/Edge/Lita triangle made for some very compelling and emotional matches, but ultimately Hardy came up short in that feud. Edge went on to win the WWE title, while Hardy floundered in opening matches and occasional "reunions" with his brother, Jeff. Moving to ECW gave his career a fresh start, and winning the ECW title was a huge step forward. But since losing that title to Jack Swagger and then instigating a feud with his brother, Hardy has gone way out on a limb. If he wins the feud against Jeff, it can propel him to the main event level for the first time in his career. If he fails, he'll forever be remembered as the lesser of the two brothers, a stigma from which he may never recover. **GRADE: B**

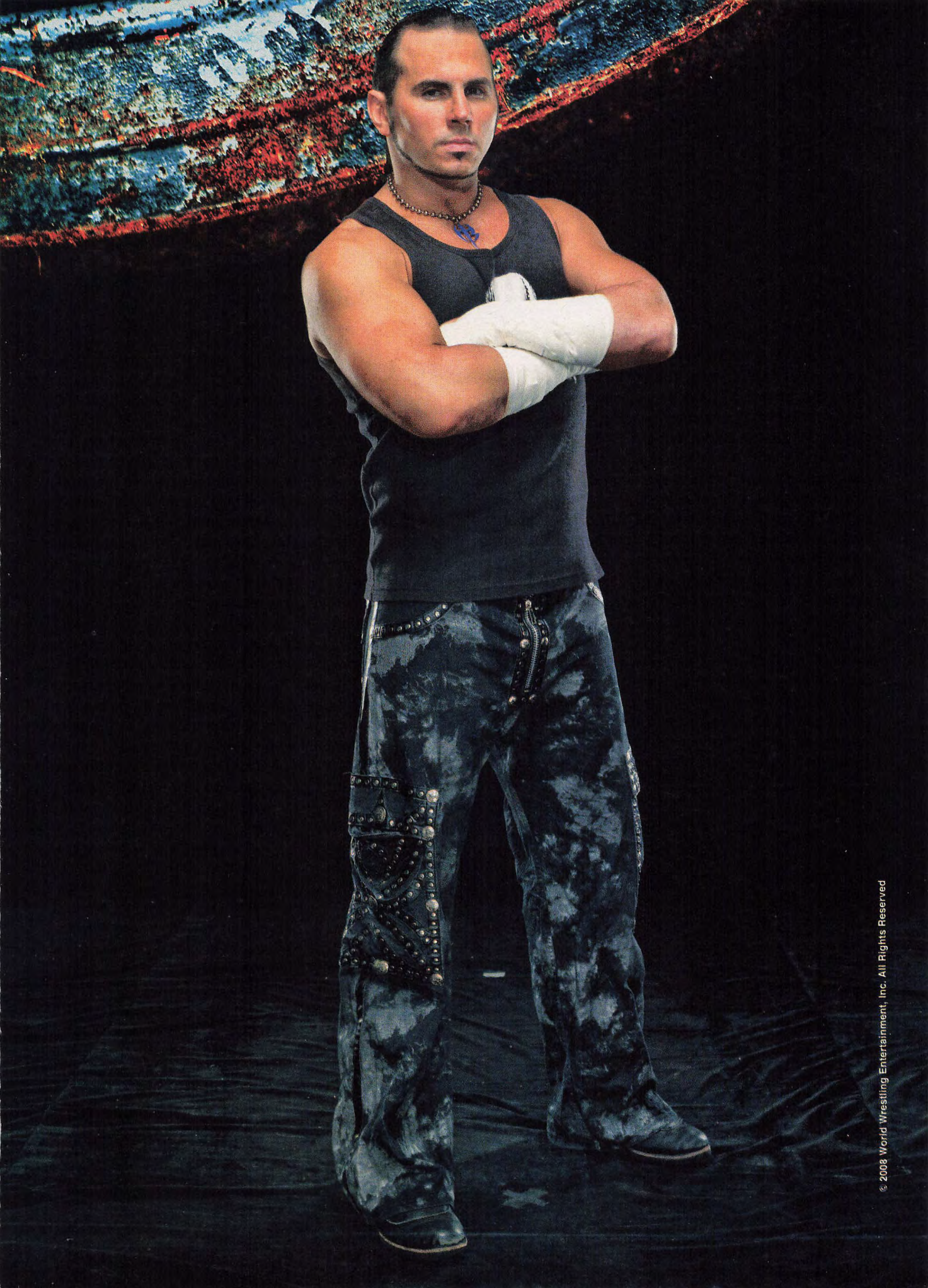
Photo by George Napolitano

MARKETABILITY: Together, Matt and Jeff Hardy were a marketing dynamo. Their likenesses were plastered on everything from T-shirts to teddy bears, and dog tags to bandannas. The moment Matt blasted Jeff with a chair at the Royal Rumble, his marketability went down the toilet. Even if Matt and Jeff ultimately reconcile, there's a good chance Matt will never be fully embraced by his old fan base again. **GRADE: C-**

REPERTOIRE: Comparisons between the two brothers are inevitable. Jeff may be a former world champion, but Matt is actually the better wrestler. Matt takes fewer risks and is crisper and cleaner in his execution than his brother. Matt uses finesse instead of turning his body into a battering ram. He quickly executes neckbreakers, snapmares, and his Twist of Fate. He uses leverage when applying wear-down holds, and keeps his weight level and under control, which limits opponents' ability to throw him. That being said, adding a submission move or two would add some depth to his game. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: The ECW title helped Hardy stop the bleeding and get his career back in order. He had been struggling for a long time on the Smackdown brand. He needed to prove—perhaps as much to himself as to the fans—that he could still compete for a major championship and that he could beat a competitor like Mark Henry. Now he is at the biggest impasse of his career. He's all-in. A winning feud—not just one match, but a decisive feud—against his brother can make him a star. Failure will confirm his status as an also-ran. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: Even though Jeff has resisted the idea of fighting against his brother, the feud between the former Team Extreme is one of the most intriguing of 2009 thus far. As long as the two brothers are at war, Matt is a viable attraction and a valuable commodity for WWE. Once this feud runs its course, it will be interesting to see where Matt goes next. If he can find his old swagger from the Mattitude days, he could be immensely valuable. But if he falls back to where he was at the start of 2008, he's not of much use at all. **GRADE: C**



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KANE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: It's been difficult for a few years now to figure out Kane's goals. The WWE championship … or World championship? Okay, so we could say that of every WWE wrestler who's anywhere near the top tier. But is that realistic for Kane in 2009? Was it in 2008? WWE broadcasters will tell you he is as dangerous as anyone in the sport. Well, maybe dangerous in a pyromaniac sort of way, but he's not much of a threat to win one of the top two titles. He beat Chavo Guerrero Jr. for the ECW gold in about half a millisecond at WrestleMania 24, but how much did that mean? If staying in the top mix much of the time was his goal, he gets high marks. If we grade him against WWE's top stars in terms of accomplishments, he didn't do so well. We'll split it down the middle. **GRADE: C+**

MARKETABILITY: Do you see many kids at WWE events dashing to the merchandise stands to get the new Kane T-shirt before it sells out? Heck, do you see anyone wearing Kane T-shirts? A few years ago, Kane was the monster in a movie (*See No Evil*) that got released to theaters. Granted, it was just a predictable bloodfest, but that was still an accomplishment. We don't see another starring role in his future. After more than a decade of service, WWE isn't sure what to do with Kane, so marketable he is not. **GRADE: C-**

REPERTOIRE: We're still waiting for Kane to watch his, um, brother, The Undertaker, in an extended match and realize how the "Dead Man" has so skillfully extended his career and added to his legend by not only reinventing his persona over the years, but significantly upgrading his repertoire. Go ahead and watch a 'Taker PPV match from a decade ago and marvel at the difference. Watch a Kane match from 10 years ago, and too many of the moves are the same. They're mostly good moves, but they're stale. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: Did our eyes deceive us, or did Kane lose a head-scratching number of throwaway TV matches over the past year? It wasn't too many years ago that pinning Kane on TV was a newsworthy event. Now it's no big deal when he drops a decision to Kofi Kingston. Kane is versatile in that he can wrestle early on a card or be part of a main event and not look out of place. He moves up a little one week and down a little the next, but all in all, he's in about the same spot he was last year … and maybe the year before that … and maybe … **GRADE: C-**

Photo by George Napolitano

OVERALL VALUE: Let's bottom-line this. If WWE wished Kane the best of luck in his future endeavors tomorrow, we'd be quite surprised. He still has value. But it might be a few days before TNA President Dixie Carter picked up the phone and called him. And TNA wouldn't break the bank to get him. If Kane just quietly disappeared from WWE, we might not notice his absence for a few weeks. His value now is more in his ability to help WWE build future stars. **GRADE: C**

Photo by Matt Roberts

BETH PHOENIX

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: There is little doubt that Beth Phoenix has the ability to be the most dominant female competitor WWE has seen in years. There is little question that, even on her worst day, "The Glamazon" is capable of defeating anyone in her way. What is curious is her continued association with the bumbling Santino Marella, a relationship that has only compromised Phoenix's focus. The addition of intern Rosa Mendez to "Glammarella" coincided, not so coincidentally, with Phoenix losing her WWE Women's title to Melina at the Royal Rumble. The woman WWE named 2008 Diva of the Year should be taking a backseat to no one, but is instead sharing the ride with her current entourage and its persistent comedy of errors. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: Phoenix and Marella are such an offbeat pair that their interactions regularly lead to some genuinely funny moments. This may not be best for her career in the long run, but the pairing has provided some interesting glimpses into her personality. Despite Phoenix's serious demeanor, it is apparent that she has a soft side. This is something that has yet to be explored in-depth on the air, but must eventually be exploited if she is ever to rise to the level of accepted greatness that Divas such as Trish Stratus and Lita have before her. **GRADE: C**

REPERTOIRE: Not since the days of Chyna has the WWE seen the likes of a female performer with the size, strength, and physical presence of Phoenix. What makes her different from her Attitude Era counterpart, however, is Phoenix's technical ability and agility. Her Glam-Slam is a vicious, violent finisher, but we've seen it countered into a victory roll too many times to count. Phoenix employs a number of submission moves in her arsenal, but needs to use them with more regularity. **GRADE: B-**

CAREER GROWTH: With all due respect to Melina, there is no good reason why Phoenix should not still have the WWE Women's title around her waist. Even accepting Melina's upset win at the Rumble, why has Phoenix wasted so much time in seeking a series of rematches? Does anyone think that Melina, or any Diva, could stand up to a sustained campaign of brutality from Phoenix? Clearly, Phoenix has lost her aggressive edge as well as her confidence. She needs to refocus on her goals and avoid the distractions around her, one way or another. **GRADE: C**

Photo by George Napolitano

OVERALL VALUE: For someone who appears to take winning so seriously, we are dumbfounded that Phoenix continues to keep Marella around. He has cost her several big matches, and is a laughingstock, plain and simple. If Phoenix can't see Marella's ulterior methods in hiring Mendez as an "intern," well, perhaps she's not as sharp as we originally thought. Or, maybe there really is just no accounting for taste. Either way, Marella has certainly done Phoenix no favors, and we simply can't see her attaining much more in her career before kicking the unibrowed-one to the curb. **GRADE: C**

Photo by Shane M. Kidder

SUICIDE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: For a wrestler that claims to hail from a video game, winning the X division title is a nice accomplishment. However, the original purpose of the Suicide character was to entice gamers to buy the *TNA Impact! Video Game*. Unfortunately, that campaign was met with mediocre reviews and ho-hum sales. In the ring, give Suicide an A for leaving Destination X with the X title. On the TV screen, *TNA Impact! Video Game's* middling splash among gamers earns him a C. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: Unlike most wrestling stars who establish themselves in the ring before spawning merchandise, Suicide did the reverse. Legends such as Mil Mascaras and Tiger Mask followed a similar path, but Suicide hasn't connected with the masses on a level that even comes close to how those men enraptured fans. The fact that he doesn't speak—and that his physique and wrestling style seem remarkably similar to Christopher Daniels'—make Suicide a difficult sell to fans as somebody fresh and new, especially to non-gamers. It has even been reported that TNA resorted to issuing free Suicide T-shirts to fans in Orlando prior to a recent *Impact* taping to enhance the perception of fan interest in him. **GRADE: C**

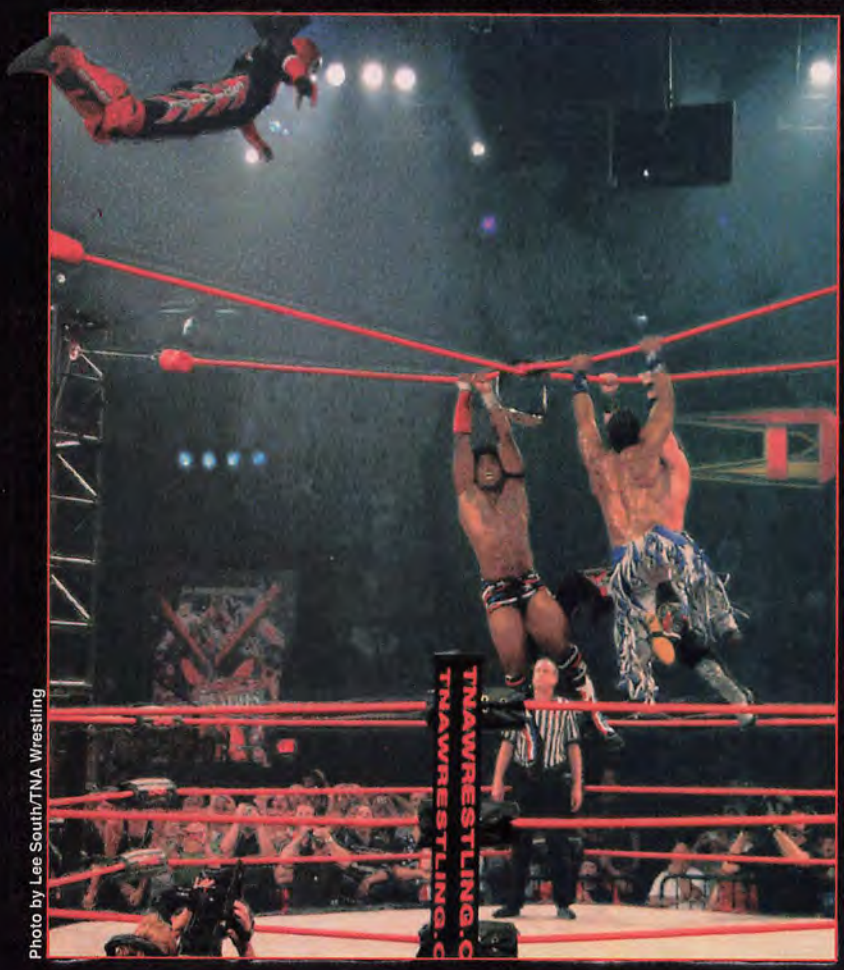

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: Suicide's game is all about keeping foes off-balance. He uses his surprise ring entrance, and then his jolting strikes, to startle and stun adversaries. Although he usually enters the ring with a descent from the ceiling, Suicide isn't a true aerialist in the wrestling sense. He actually relies more heavily on swift, high-impact moves such as headbutts and kicks. Suicide is also adept at stringing together maneuvers—especially huracanranas—which he uses to disorient opponents and set them up for his DOA finisher, one of the most impressive maneuvers in the sport. **GRADE: B+**

CAREER GROWTH: Assuming Suicide is in fact Christopher Daniels, going from heralded underground favorite to video-game-character-come-to-life must be considered a step backward. However, Suicide did capture the second most significant title in a major wrestling company, and that offsets any regression. **GRADE: C+**

OVERALL VALUE: Suicide (or Daniels … or Curry Man) is talented and experienced enough to challenge for the TNA World title. But by targeting Alex Shelley and the X division, he has pigeonholed himself into TNA's junior varsity. Injecting himself into the Frontline-Main Event Mafia feud could restore him to TNA's top tier, which is where a wrestler of his ability belongs. Suicide may have given gamers something to get excited about for a moment or two, but in the ring, his arrival hasn't lived up to the hype, yet. **GRADE: C**

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

THE BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: To revive a very popular cliché, The Beautiful People were all style and no substance last year. Sure, Angelina Love, Velvet Sky, and Cute Kip angered, insulted, and humiliated every TNA member that crossed their paths in the past year. So, on that level, The Beautiful People achieved their goals. Trouble is, their outrageous antics—which included an unsuccessful bid at drafting "Governor Sarah Palin" (actually, Shannon Spruill, the former Daffney) into their ranks—while affording them plenty of airtime on *Impact*, amounted to nothing in the ring. The Beautiful People's futility was so bad that then-TNA Knockouts champion Taylor Wilde defeated Velvet Sky three times inside of 10 minutes on July 24. **GRADE: C-**

MARKETABILITY: Love 'em or hate 'em, Love and Sky are perhaps the sexiest females in the business today—and we all know how much mileage a wrestling company can get out of sexy women. With all due respect to Traci Brooks, it is The Beautiful People that put the T and A in TNA. Both women are worthy of being the face(s) of TNA's Knockout division … if TNA has no intention of focusing on the Knockouts' athleticism. Unfortunately for Love and Sky, neither can be considered a serious contender to Awesome Kong. And fans still have difficulty disassociating Kip from his "Badd Ass" Billy Gunn of DeGeneration-X fame. Adding sexy newcomer Madison Rayne to the group doesn't hurt its marketability. **GRADE: B-**

REPERTOIRE: Of the two, Love comes off as the better wrestler. Both women offer a steady diet of slaps, kicks, hair-pulls, and scratches, but Love seems more at ease throwing in an occasional maneuver. Considering Angelina's experience and Velvet's athletic background, fans should expect—make that demand—more than the foreign objects and outside interference they've come to depend on in the ring. Ironically, both seem much more capable in the ring when they wrestle the occasional independent bout. What happens when they step into that six-sided ring? **GRADE: C-**

CAREER GROWTH: Give The Beautiful People their due, with or without Kip, they command attention any time they show up in the Impact Zone. They crave the spotlight and have become a focal point of TNA's weekly shows. There's only one step left for Angelina Love and Velvet Sky to take and that's perfecting their individual skills to the point where they can mount an earnest challenge to Awesome Kong or whomever holds the TNA Knockouts title. **GRADE: B-**

OVERALL VALUE: There's no way around it, Angelina Love and Velvet Sky are hot. We suppose the same could be said of Kip. Their sex appeal serves TNA very well, but there is no shortage of sexy wrestlers (of both sexes) that could do what they do. Simply put, all three members could be offering TNA fans a whole lot more at this time. **GRADE: C-**

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

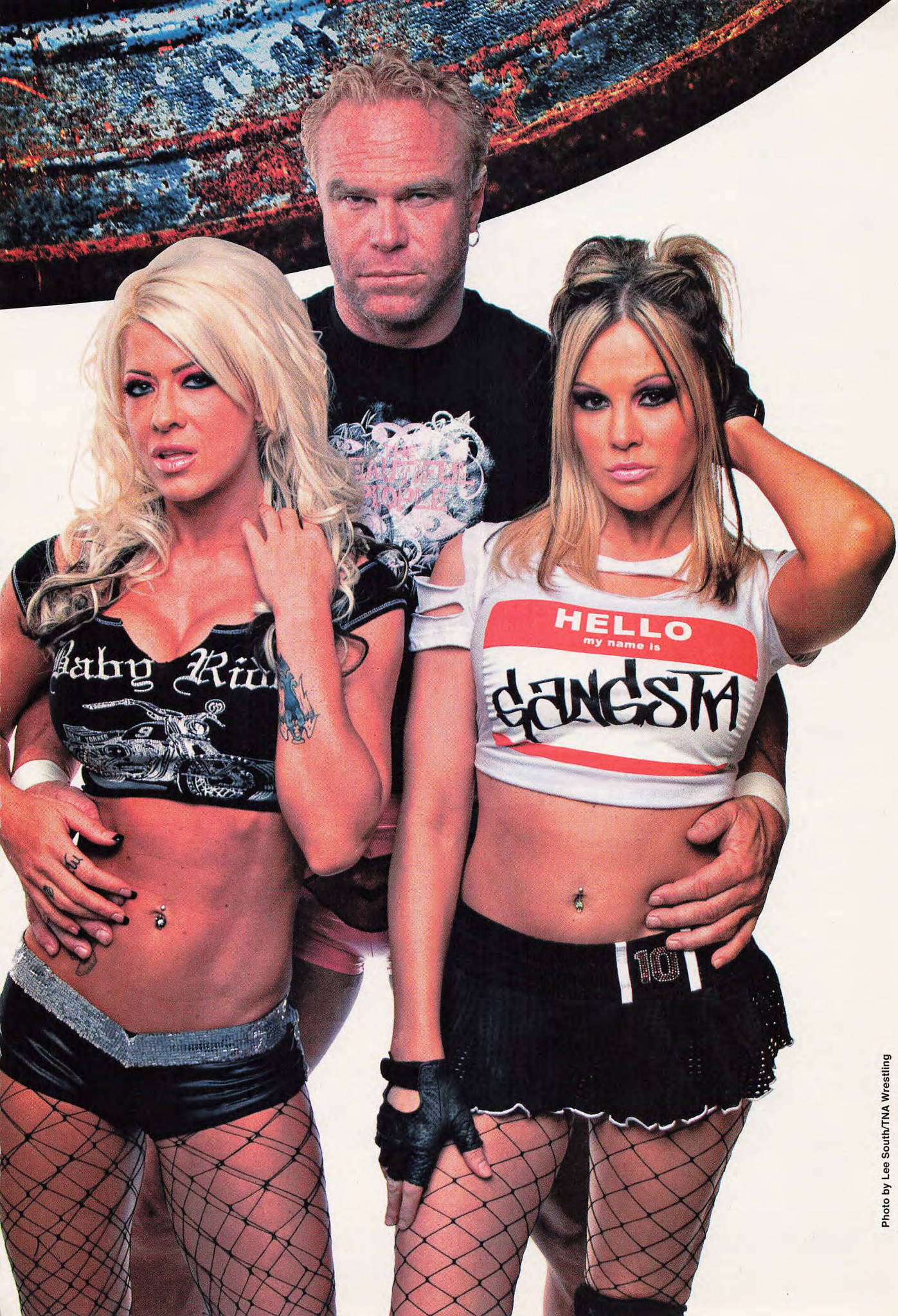

Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

KELLY KELLY

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: Kelly-squared might well have aspired to be the next WWE Diva to bare all for *Playboy* a year ago, but there wasn't a next WWE Diva to do that in 2009. So what to do for a gorgeous blonde whose goal used to be to try to get all of her clothes off on ECW TV each week before Mike Knox or someone else could cover her up? How about become a pretty decent wrestler? Pretty decent isn't the highest of praise, but if you watched KK during her first few months in WWE, did you really expect to see her in any match that didn't involve her rolling around in pudding or gravy or having her clothes torn off? We didn't. It'll be interesting to see if she continues to get better or if she's satisfied with adequate. **GRADE: B-**

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MARKETABILITY: If there's a Divas photo shoot to be done, video to be made, or just about anything else, Kelly will be involved prominently. Considering her initial exhibitionist persona, dare we say she has distinguished herself somewhat with her girl-next-door good looks? Okay, so it's the girl next door in tight, fairly skimpy outfits, but it's something. **GRADE: B**

REPERTOIRE: We never thought there would be reason to assess Kelly Kelly's wrestling repertoire, so that alone tells you a lot. She doesn't have a signature move or hold, but she has evolved beyond kicking, punching, and pulling hair, and she shows no fear in the ring, not even when overmatched by a Beth Phoenix. She can execute basic moves such as sunset flips, dropkicks, and backslides relatively smoothly and credibly, and though her win-loss record isn't so great, when she does win, it's not a shock anymore. **GRADE: C-**

CAREER GROWTH: Growing your career in WWE when you're a Diva is so difficult these days simply because the ladies only get so much TV time each week, and there are just so (too) many of them anymore. She experienced some career growth over the past year but not a massive amount. Let's see if she can improve enough over the next few years to join the ranks of the elite women wrestlers in WWE. **GRADE: C+**

OVERALL VALUE: Kelly Kelly is an asset to WWE, but hardly an indispensable one. Consider that the company has lost both Lita and Trish Stratus in just the last few years. Stacy Keibler and Torrie Wilson, too. It could lose Mickie James or Beth Phoenix or Melina or Michelle McCool and keep rolling on. For now, Kelly isn't going anywhere, and for that most males WWE fans are quite happy. **GRADE: C-**

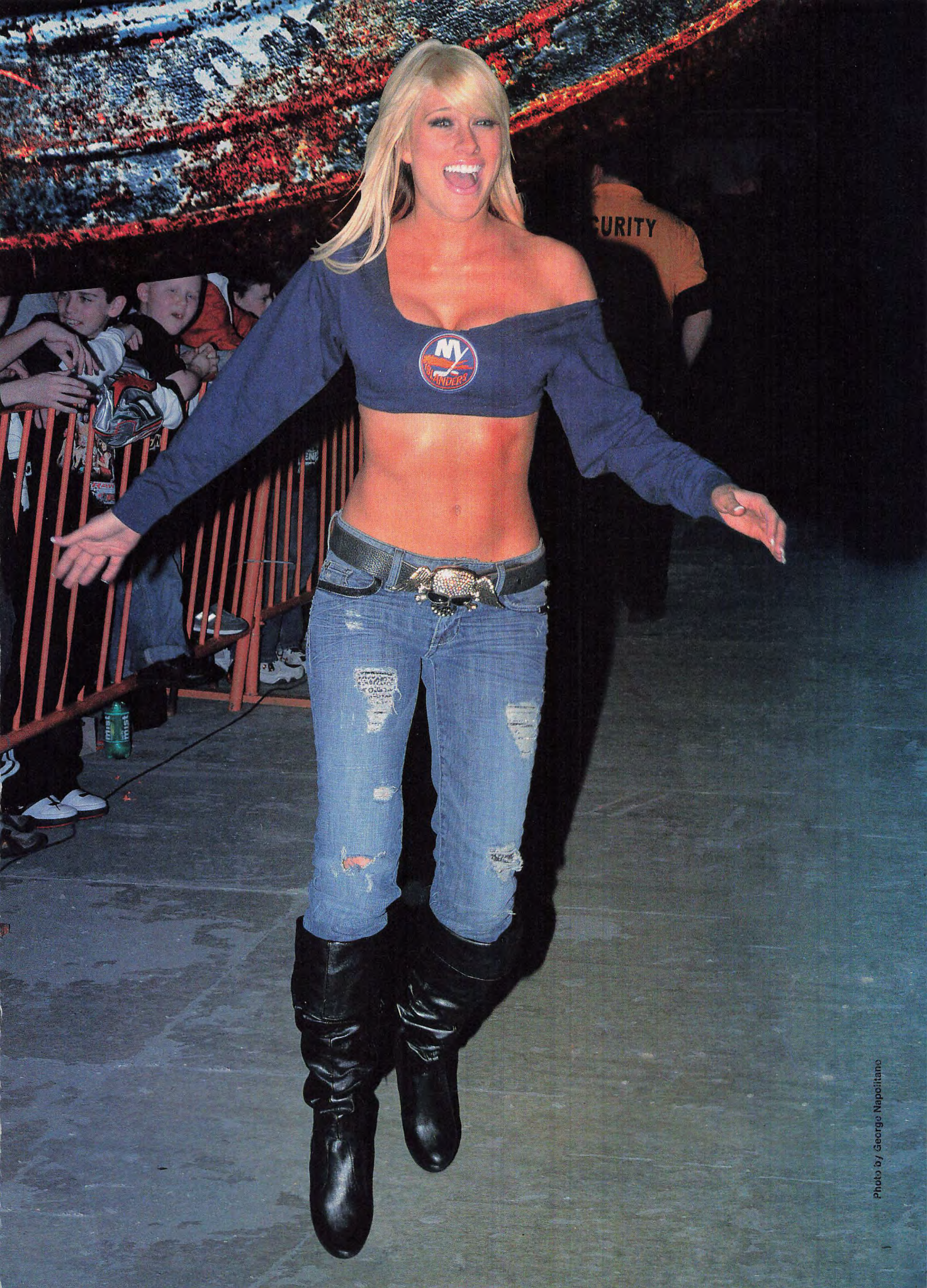

Photo by George Napolitano

BRIAN KENDRICK

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: A year ago (and for the second consecutive year), Kendrick changed brands as a result of the WWE supplemental draft. After a year with Raw, it was back to Smackdown with the hope that he'd be able to gain footing as at least a mid-card solo performer. It's a modest goal, but when you're 5'8", 184 pounds, and known as a tag team specialist in WWE, modest goals are appropriate. He gained an attitude, a bodyguard (Ezekiel Jackson), and a "the" in front of his name. And he got noticed—a little—in the lower mid-card. Baby steps, Brian. **GRADE: B**

MARKETABILITY: There's potential marketability and then there's realistic WWE marketability. Kendrick has some of the former but virtually none of the latter. Sadly, it's the latter that counts. You have to be a rare talent if you're small and looking to command Vince McMahon's undivided attention. Some would say Kendrick has that rare talent, but Vince hasn't noticed it yet. How can you be marketable if you can't even get a spot on a pay-per-view? At least WWE tried something by putting Ezekiel in his corner. If he keeps trying different things, maybe he'll find a persona that catches on in a big way someday. **GRADE: D**

REPERTOIRE: He has a huge repertoire and a diverse one at that. Call him creative in an unorthodox kind of way. But you'd need to watch old DVDs of the former Spanky in Ring of Honor or Japan to fully appreciate that. Anyone with moves he calls "Sliced Bread Number 2" and "Dr. Smoothe's Secret Recipe" is worth watching. Too bad that given his spot on Smackdown, his matches don't last long for us to see enough. **GRADE: B**

CAREER GROWTH: In Ring of Honor and on the independent circuit, Kendrick won over a lot of fans with his quirky appeal and brilliant athleticism. But in WWE, most up-and-comers need more. You have to find the right persona and you have to get the right opportunity to excel. Morphing into The Brian Kendrick was an interesting step, and it does count as career growth. But he has to find a way to pick up the pace in this category in 2009. **GRADE: C+**

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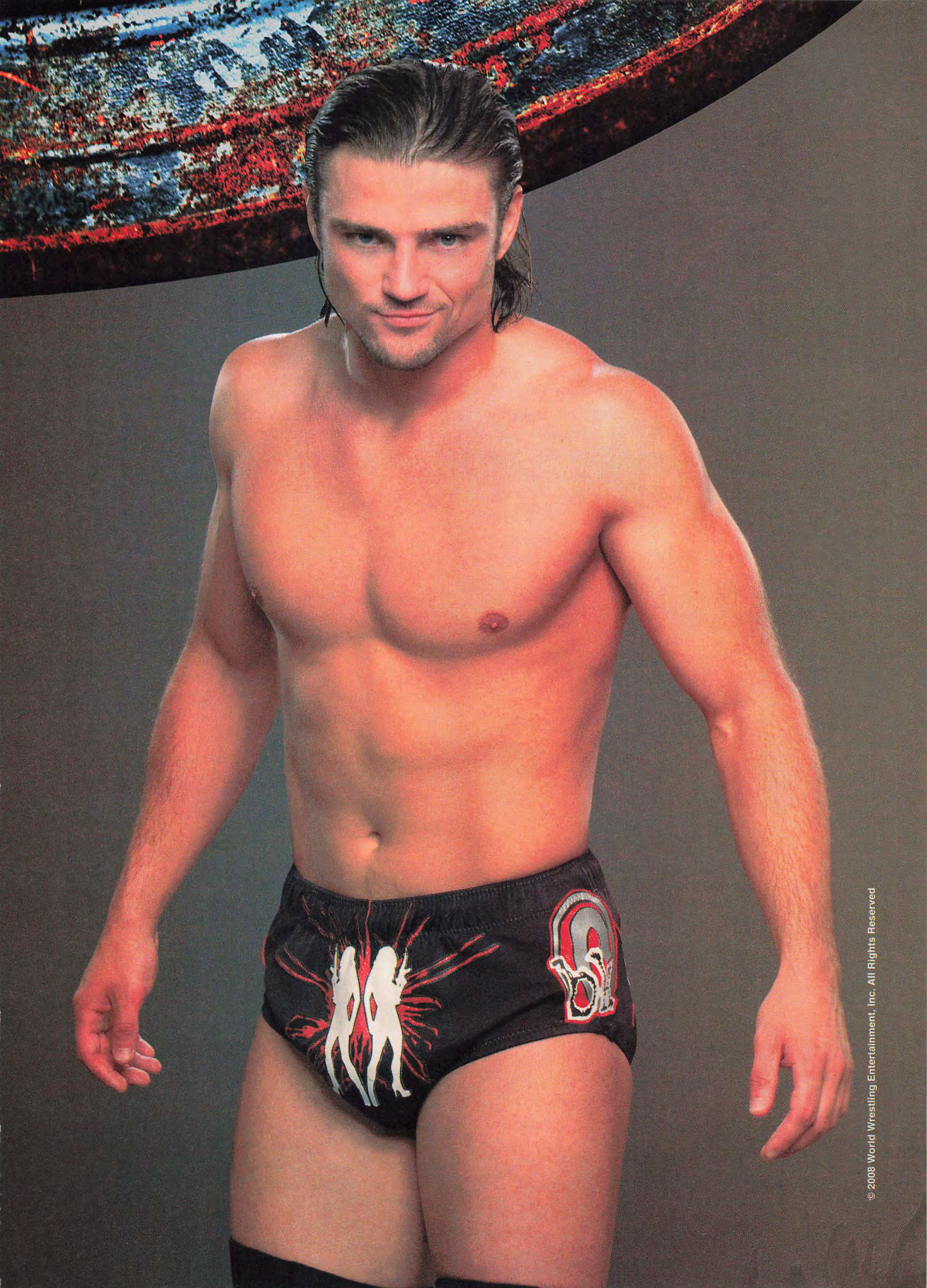
OVERALL VALUE: Stop us if you've heard this before, but WWE is not the home of the cruiserweights. Heck, the company finally just eliminated its cruiserweight title, and considering how lightly regarded that championship had become, it was the right move. Rey Mysterio Jr.'s push has slowed considerably in the past few years. Jamie Noble is a total comedy figure. Even the somewhat undersized C.M. Punk has seen his momentum slowed. Yep, size matters. Kendrick could yet be something really special, but we wouldn't bet on it happening in WWE. **GRADE: C-**



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RICKY ORTIZ

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: The man known to OVW fans as Atlas DaBone finally got the long-awaited callup to WWE and has put together an impressive won-loss record in ECW. However, he hasn't had any significant feuds or particularly memorable matches to date. In fact, after months of competition in ECW, Ortiz barely registers as a potential title contender. Sometimes slow and steady is the best pace, but any momentum Ortiz may have had has slowed to a crawl. **GRADE: C**

MARKETABILITY: You have to give Ortiz credit for trying. After his very first televised match, Ortiz was already pitching Teddy Long on marketing ideas. His "Rally Towel" is a good start, but it hasn't exactly replaced the Pittsburgh Steelers' "Terrible Towel," as it seems like only a few dozen people bother to wave one around during his matches. His unique look and "fro-nificent" hairstyle got him a gig on Sci Fi programming (as a "hunter" on ***Cha$e***), so it's clear that Ortiz has some potential. **GRADE: B-**

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REPERTOIRE: The big splash as a finisher … in 2009? Ortiz is going to have to do a lot better than that, even if he throws in that nifty little heel grab in mid-air. Ortiz is deceptively strong, but he needs to do more to assert that power. Some stall suplexes, running powerslams, and good, old-fashioned power bombs would serve him well. **GRADE: C**

CAREER GROWTH: ECW's "New Talent Initiative" can be both a blessing and a curse for young prospects. On one hand, the brand's open-door policy gave them an opportunity to get a foot in the door with WWE. On the other hand, a steady stream of young hopefuls has been pushing into ECW and they're fighting over a limited number of roster spots. Ortiz has looked good so far, but he is in danger of being overshadowed by the likes of fellow newcomers Evan Bourne, Tyson Kidd, and D.J. Gabriel. He needs to accomplish more—more dynamic moves, more personality, more feuds. If he doesn't, there's a very good chance that his ECW days are numbered … and we don't mean he'll be moving to Raw or Smackdown. **GRADE: C+**

OVERALL VALUE: On paper, Ortiz has a good deal of upside. He's big, personable, and unique. He has an energetic, carefree attitude, and he's a tireless self-promoter. Heck, those are the attributes every promotion wants in its newcomers. Ortiz badly needs something to help him stand out from the rest of the pack. Maybe it's time he demands a match against Jack Swagger or considers a heel turn. Maybe it's time for him to finally hook up with Tiffany and steal her away from Long. Maybe he just needs some new ring gear (those warmup pants scream "indy" in the worst way). He needs something, and he needs it soon, because right now all of his value is theoretical. In reality, he's just a step above the preliminary level. **GRADE: D**

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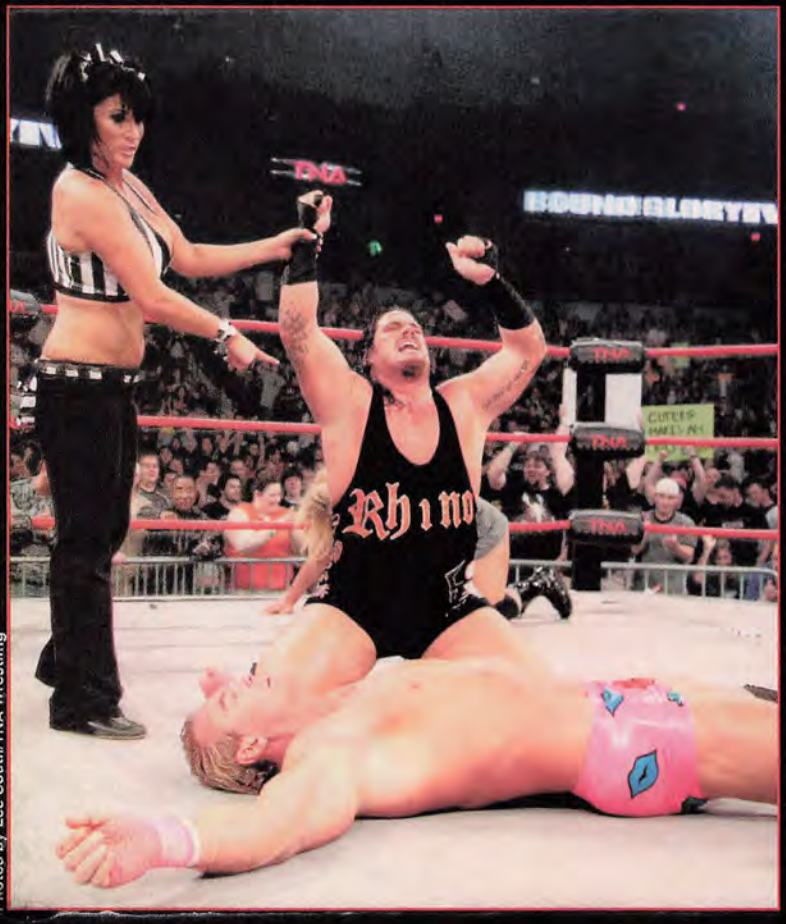
RHINO

GOAL ACHIEVEMENT: After months and months of languishing aimlessly in the mid-card, Rhino seemed to break through with a huge non-title win over TNA World champion Sting in December. At that time, he had attempted to position himself as the leader of the Frontline in their feud against the Main Event Mafia. But after falling short in his bid for the title at Genesis and enduring a series of attacks by the MEM, the "War Machine" has all but fallen off the map again. His window to strike closed quickly, and he did little to follow up on his chances. **GRADE: C+**

MARKETABILITY: Few wrestlers can match Rhino's pure intensity, but that has never translated into mass audience appeal. Though he's had the chance to speak up in TNA, his promos have been largely dull and forgettable. Because he is not a natural talker or a merchandise mover, Rhino has to rely on his in-ring performances to stand out in any way. Unfortunately, he has not had a truly memorable match or held a title of note in quite some time. **GRADE: D+**

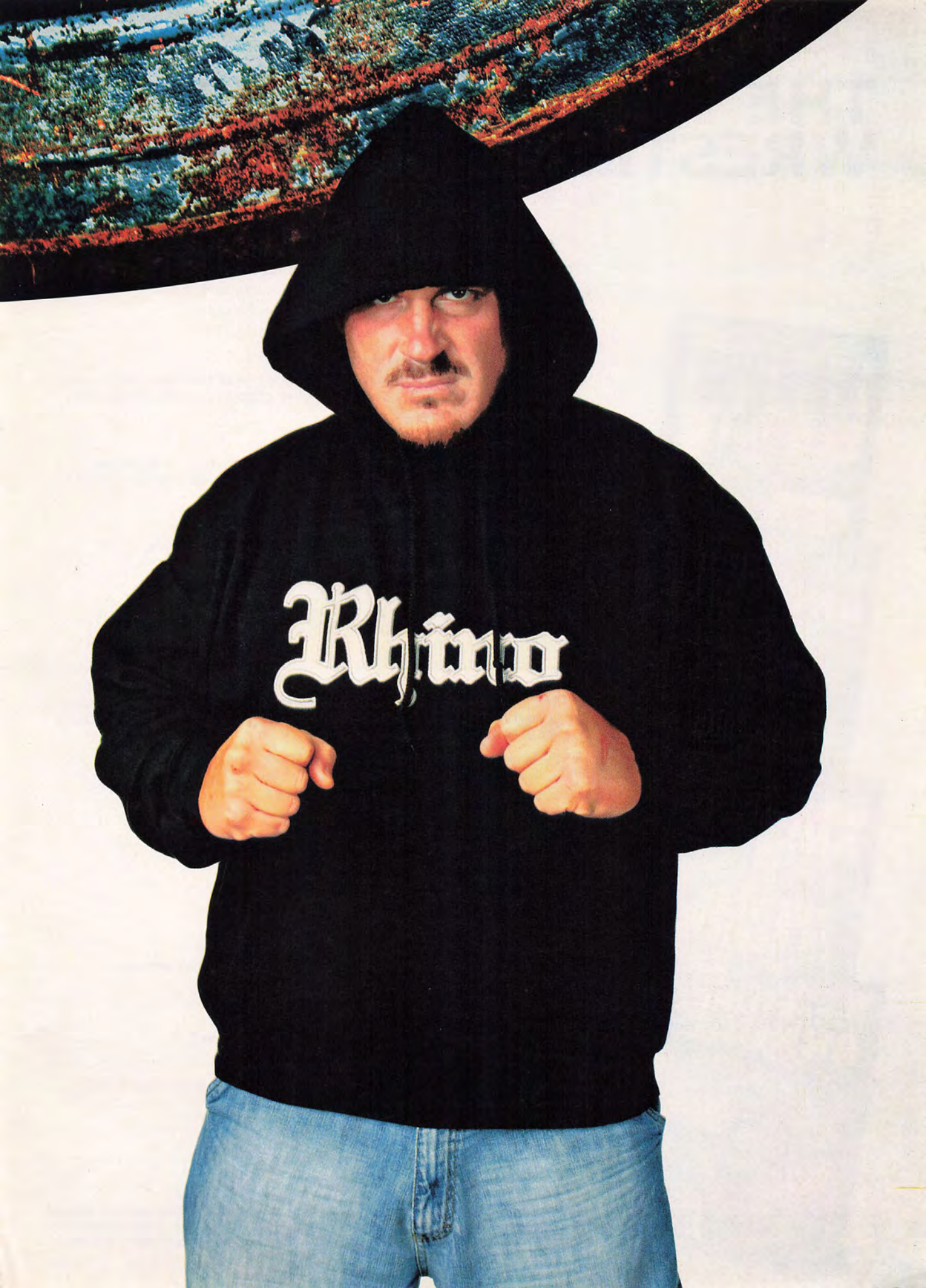


Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

REPERTOIRE: The Gore remains a violent and viable finisher … when Rhino is able to connect with it. But, therein lies the problem. There is little question that years of wear and tear are catching up with Rhino, and that he is beginning to slow down. The setup for the Gore has become predictable, and oftentimes Rhino wastes valuable time waiting for his opponent to stand up or turn around. At this stage in his career, a standing-base impact/power move would seem to be a better fit for Rhino's offense. He shouldn't abandon the Gore, but why continue relying on it so heavily? Where has that gotten him? **GRADE: C+**

CAREER GROWTH: Prior to Rhino stepping up and challenging the MEM late last year, he was involved in a rather pointless feud with the similarly directionless Sheik Abdul Bashir. So the mere fact that he was able to pull himself out of the mid-card and score a few main-event paydays was a huge step forward for him. He has sputtered since, however, and again teeters on the brink of irrelevancy. It's time for Rhino to truly shake things up and perhaps revisit the silent, monster heel persona that worked so well for him in the original ECW years ago. He needs to do something to regain his edge and project his aggressive nature. **GRADE: C-**

OVERALL VALUE: Rhino appears to be at a crossroads in his career. With so many former WWE stars floating around TNA these days, he simply can't get by on reputation alone. Nagging injuries are mounting, as his chance to become TNA World champion is rapidly dwindling. Rhino has been, essentially, missing in action since his loss to Sting at Genesis. If he completely disappeared, would many even notice? We're not so sure. **GRADE: D**


Rhino

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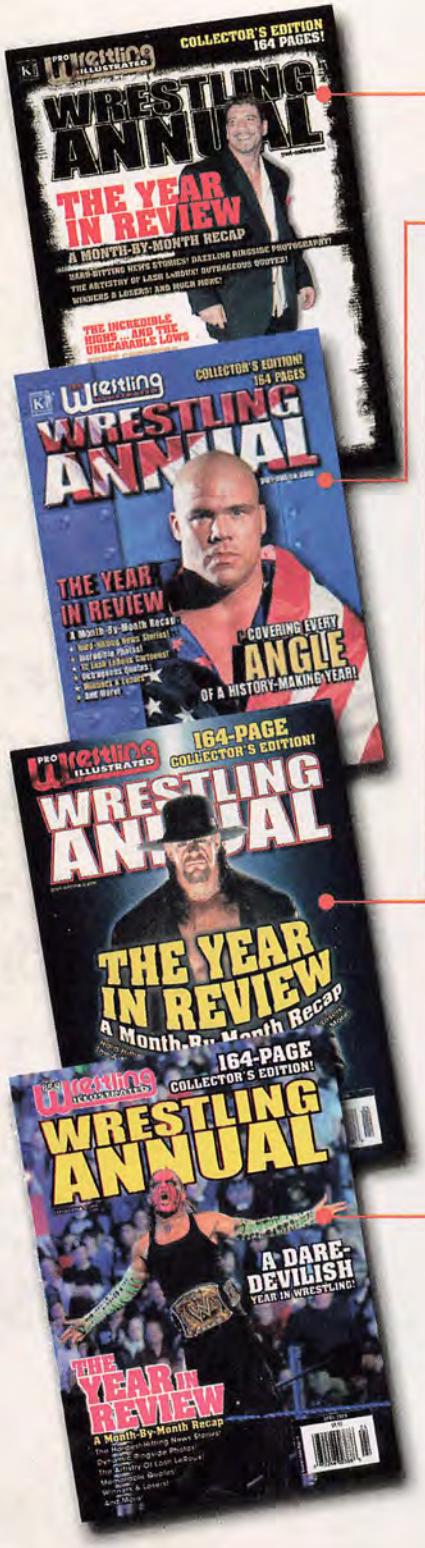

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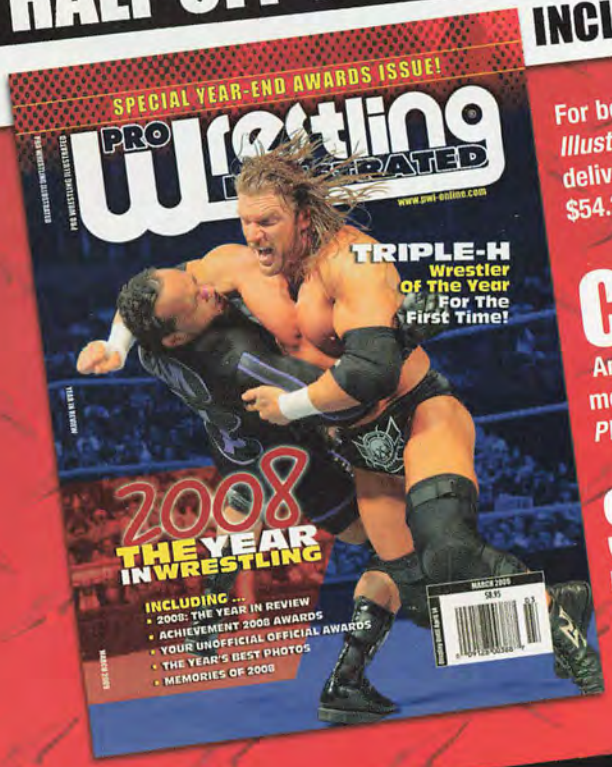

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